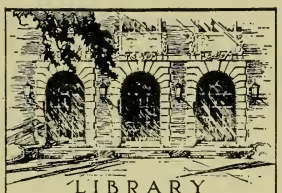
MATRIMONY.



LIBRARY
OF THE
UNIVERSITY
OF ILLINOIS
823
N47m
v.3

MATRIMONY.

BY

W. E. NORRIS,

AUTHOR OF "MADEMOISELLE DE MERSAC."

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

LONDON:

SMITH, ELDER & CO., 15, WATERLOO PLACE.

1881.

(*All rights reserved.*)

PRINTED BY WILLIAM CLOWES AND SONS, LIMITED, LONDON AND BECCLES.

N47m
v.3

CONTENTS OF VOL. III.

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	PUBLIC CRITICISM	1
II.	THE INDISCRETION OF M. HIRSCH ...	23
III.	CLOUDS IN THE RUE D'AMSTERDAM ...	51
IV.	IN THE LINCOLNSHIRE WOLDS ...	82
V.	AMONG THE SAND-HILLS	101
VI.	EXCELLENT ADVICE	123
VII.	A RECOGNITION	149
VIII.	A RETROSPECT	171
IX.	THE LESSONS OF EXPERIENCE	199
X.	IRA BREVIS FUROR	230
XI.	THE BEGINNING OF THE END	263
XII.	THE END	296

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2009 with funding from
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

http://www.archive.org/details/matrimony03norr

MATRIMONY.

CHAPTER I.

PUBLIC CRITICISM.

One sunny May morning the posters at the entrance of the Théâtre du Colisée, and the fifty—more or less—daily newspapers with which Paris is blessed, announced the first representation of an entirely new drama, entitled "Amour et Amitié." Many of the newspapers had for some time previously been preparing their readers for this intelligence by letting fall sundry hints as to the plot of the piece which M. Leroux was understood to have in preparation, by describing the various toilettes which Mdlle. Thoméry, to whom the chief *rôle* had been assigned, had ordered of her dressmaker for the occasion, and by imparting such information as could be gleaned

with reference to the young and gifted Englishman who was about to enter the ranks of French authors. It was Varinka who, through the medium of her bellicose journalist, had thus helped the coming event to cast its shadow before it. Claud himself had little fancy for such devices; but more experienced persons differed from him, and unquestionably the curiosity of the public was excited, and the interests of the play in so far served, by the premature disclosure of the author's nationality. The strange phenomenon of a French play written by an Englishman naturally took the fancy of the Parisians, who have been compared before now to the Athenians of St. Paul's day; and doubtless the novelty of the attraction offered acted as a stimulus to the sale of tickets for "Amour et Amitié," which, on this last day, found ready purchasers at four and five times their authorized price. Everybody who was anybody had secured a place at the Colisée for this important evening.

"It is a success before the event!" cried the optimist Poinsot enthusiastically.

Claud, for his part, was far from being equally sanguine. The weeks which had elapsed between the formal acceptance of his piece and its production had been little else

than a prolonged martyrdom for him. Released from the labour of composition, which had hitherto kept his time and thoughts occupied, he had had leisure to indulge in the alternating fits of hope and despondency which commonly beset those who are committed to a doubtful enterprise, and to experience all the feverish miseries of suspense.

M. Leroux, whose impassive melancholy was not to be dissipated by anything short of accomplished facts, had administered to him something more than an antidote to the unmeasured eulogies of the Princess's guests.

"When all is said, monsieur," the manager had observed, "it is neither you, nor I, nor our friend M. Poinsot there who will deliver judgment upon you, but the public; and I, who have served the public for five-and-twenty years, have reason to know that it is a capricious master. I have seen it reject works of high merit, and acclaim rubbish which I blushed to put upon my stage. For myself, I think well of your piece, as I have proved to you by accepting it; but I answer for nothing. My advice to you is not to be over-elated, if it succeeds, nor too much cast down, if it fails. In the latter case, you will have the consolation of thinking that you are not alone in misfortune;

for, after all, it would be upon me that the expense of a failure would fall."

These words of cold comfort rang continually in Claud's ears, and effectually robbed other and more encouraging utterances of their sweetness. There were days when it was pain and grief to him to hear his play mentioned—when he would escape into the streets, and wander hither and thither for hours with no other object than to be alone. But his spirits rose as the limit of uncertainty drew nearer; some alterations in the text, demanded at the last moment by Mdlle. Thoméry, an imperious lady, afforded him employment; a full-dress rehearsal, which passed off without any contretemps, served to cheer him; and when the supreme moment came, he was able, with some creditable show of outward composure, to enter the box in which his wife, Varinka and Geneviève, attended by Miss Potts, had already taken their places.

From the friendly shade of the background he looked out upon a house crowded from roof to basement—upon the great ladies whose diamonds glittered all round the curve of the first tier; upon the ladies who were bediamonded without being great; upon the critics, suave and impartial; upon the *jeunesse*

dorée, vacuous, pommaded, gloved, after the manner of its kind; upon the delegates of the million overhead; and below, in the stalls and pit, upon a multitude of heads, some sleek, some bald, some shaggy, all containing a greater or less modicum of brain, which would presently be called upon to exercise its functions, and create a reputation or strangle it in its birth. And as he surveyed the throng, it seemed to him that he was looking, not so much at that many-headed master of whom Leroux had spoken as at a host of enemies whose approbation must be wrested from them by conquest, and in whose presence his own audacity and weakness became startlingly apparent. What was it to all these indifferent strangers that he had toiled day after day and night after night in perfecting the work which they were to judge of at one hearing? What did they care, though the future of two lives hung on their nod? To his excited fancy this good-natured, chattering public assumed the guise of a cruel, man-devouring dragon, against which he—poor pigmy!—must presently sally forth and do battle, with no other weapon in his hand than a goosequill.

He communicated some of these sinister impressions to Poinsot, who was standing be-

hind him, sweeping the house with his opera-glasses, and who answered him with a shade of derision.

"You are much to be pitied, *parbleu!* It is a terrible affair that all Paris should come to see your first play, is it not? But don't you understand, oh, wretched and ungrateful young man! that you have arrived at the finest moment of your whole life? When will you feel again the delightful tremor that you do now? When will the intoxicating emotion that you will feel directly, when the clapping begins, come back to you? Do you suppose that one does not grow accustomed to the applause of the crowd as quickly as to all other things?"

"Ah, you speak at your ease: you are a successful author."

"And you are upon the point of becoming one. That is why I should be glad to change places with you."

Poinsot resumed his examination of the audience, and waved his hand to some distant acquaintance. How long was this ordeal going to last? Claude wondered. Would they never begin?

Nina, perfectly calm and at her ease, was pointing out to her neighbour the toilette of the Austrian ambassadress opposite.

"Real old *point de Venise;* I could swear to it at any distance."

"What has become of M. Hirsch?" Geneviève asked.

"He has gone behind the scenes," answered the Princess over her shoulder. "He is snuffing the battle from afar, like Job's war-horse."

"My dear madam!" ejaculated Miss Potts, scandalized.

"Well—what? Job had a war-horse; you will find him mentioned in the scriptures. I could give you chapter and verse, if I chose. Tell me, M. Poinsot—you who know everybody—who are those people over there?"

"Compatriots of yours, Princess—General Karakoff and his wife. Did you never meet him? He is the most inveterate gambler in Europe."

"Ah! He has an air of distinction. You might bring him to see me, some evening, if you liked."

In the midst of the fragments of conversation which caught Claud's ear from time to time and of the buzz of voices which filled all the house, three loud raps resounded from the stage, arousing, we may be sure, a corresponding number of thumps in our hero's breast. There was a general "Sh-h-h!"—and the curtain rose.

There was nothing in the first act of "Amour et Amitié" which could afford a clue to the ultimate fate of the play. Ending with the marriage of Georges de Sancerre, it was little more than a prelude to the plot, and left the *motif* still uncertain. It met with a favourable, but not very warm reception; and this was about as much as could have been reasonably expected for it. Such applause as there was came obviously from the *claque* and was not taken up in other parts of the theatre; but the audience was attentive and, to all appearance, not dissatisfied. Claud, who had begun by being as nervous as a conscript on the eve of his first battle, had recovered himself, now that he was, so to speak, under fire, and was able to take note of the impression produced upon those who sat in his neighbourhood, and to recognize with pleasure that it was not an adverse one. He even fancied that he could detect a qualified approbation in the air of the redoubtable critics. During the entr'acte M. Leroux entered the box, and was presented to the ladies, who smiled upon him graciously. So graciously, indeed, that he felt it incumbent upon him to speak a few deprecatory words.

"I have done my part, mesdames; the rest is in the hands of fortune and of the public.

All that I can tell you is that we have spared neither pains nor expense. And, as you see, we have managed to draw a crowd."

The manager was a trifle less lugubrious than usual. Several capable judges, he said, had praised the author's style and judicious use of colloquialisms; he was satisfied with the effect of the first act, with regard to which he confessed that he had had certain misgivings; he did not contradict M. Hirsch, who declared boldly that the only dangerous place had been triumphantly passed, and that the road to honour and distinction now lay open.

In the second act Mdlle. Thoméry made her appearance as the Comtesse de Charolles, and was greeted with the sustained acclamations to which that popular actress is accustomed. She looked and acted her part to perfection. A complete change came over the aspect of the house during the really clever and brilliant scene which ensued between her and Georges; every point was seized, and marked by murmurs of approval, and whenever an opportunity occurred, the plaudits were loud and long.

"You see," said Poinsot, nodding to Claud. "They are waking up; they are beginning to appreciate you."

"It is the costume," muttered the prosaic

Leroux. And, in fact, Mdlle. Thoméry's walking-dress, which had been designed for the express purpose of introducing a new fashion, was exciting a good deal of admiring scrutiny among the ranks of the ladies. Still, making due deductions for this, and for the homage paid to the actress's talent, there still remained a fair share of applause to be set down to the author's credit; and when the curtain fell once more amidst prolonged clapping from all parts of the theatre, Claud felt himself justified in singing an inward *Io triumphe!*

"Let me be the first to congratulate you, my dear *confrère*," cried Poinsot, stretching out his hand.

Other zealous friends came streaming in through the open door of the box, and for a few minutes our hero found himself the subject of a small ovation, and tasted all the joys of success. Then he went down to express his thanks to Mdlle. Thoméry, whom he found in high good humour, and who was not chary of her compliments in return for his. A similar interchange of civilities with the other members of the company had next to be gone through. Everybody was contented; everybody was full of confidence; already the prize seemed to be within the fortunate author's grasp.

But Act III., alas! was destined to exemplify the truth of the old proverb, that there's many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip. It became only too plain that Madame de Charolles was the sole character that interested the audience. She continued to be received with marked sympathy; but her appearances were less frequent than in the foregoing act, and the scenes between the blameless Victor and Eugénie, and the former's rather lengthy soliloquies fell woefully flat. And now one of those untoward accidents occurred which have sealed the fate of many better pieces than "Amour et Amitié.' At the conclusion of a visit paid to the disconsolate Eugénie, who is as yet unaware of the full extent of her misfortune, Victor, finding the situation intolerable, and fearing lest he should be betrayed into saying too much, is made to seize his hat and make a precipitate move towards the door; while the lady innocently lays her hand upon his arm to detain him. The impersonatress of Madame de Sancerre played her part here to such purpose that she very nearly dragged Victor's light overcoat off his shoulders, whereupon some wag piped out in a shrill treble from the gallery, "*Cours vite, mon p'tit Joseph!*" which sally had the effect of bringing the

scene to an end in the midst of a universal hilarity.

After this it was all up with poor Victor. Every time that he appeared upon the stage some fresh witticism was hurled at him from the gallery; he could not open his lips without provoking an ill-suppressed titter in all quarters of the house. The unfortunate actor was fairly put out of countenance at last, and mumbled through his part in a sufficiently ridiculous and shamefaced manner.

In the fourth act matters went even worse. The audience no longer laughed, but yawned. A murmur of conversation began to make itself heard; some persons moved from their places, making more noise over it than was necessary; a few left the theatre. Not all the skill of Mdlle. Thoméry, not the *chef-d'œuvre* in the form of a ball-dress which she wore, not the development of the plot, nor the dialogue which had cost Claud so many laborious hours of polishing and repolishing availed to stave off the impending catastrophe. No room for illusions was left: "Amour et Amitié" had been weighed in the balance, and found wanting.

And yet the piece was by no means without its good points. Witness the opinion of M. Poinsot—a competent judge, if ever there was

one—who maintains to this day that it was within an ace of making a hit. But the story was ill-suited for the stage; it dragged painfully in places, and lacked action throughout. Moreover, Claud had taken too literally M. Leroux's caution against fine phrases. In his determination to avoid bombast, and to use only the language of real life, he had erred in the opposite direction, and made his personages talk coolly and concisely upon occasions when, in real life, less measured utterances would probably have been heard. It was from real life that he had studied, but he had omitted to study real life under abnormal conditions; and the result was that he produced a picture in which one boldly and cleverly drawn figure was flanked by a number of uncertain outlines. Out of such materials as he had worked upon an entertaining story might possibly have been constructed—hardly a tolerable play.

The one dramatic situation of the fifth act came too late to dispel the ill-humour of an angry and disappointed public. It was scarcely looked at or listened to; and the actors, who had loyally done their best, and struggled for an hour or more past against a foregone condemnation, played hurriedly now, and with evident discouragement. Doubtless they, in

common with the author and the audience, were anxious to get the unlucky business finished with all despatch.

It is a pity that plays are not like speeches or lectures, which, if found unmistakably wearisome, can be wound up and ended, or ended without being wound up, to the great comfort of speaker and hearers alike; for, had such a course been practicable, Claud might have been spared one final humiliation. The conclusion of the play was certainly the weakest point in a composition which was not remarkable for strength in any part. The lack of poetical justice which left the prize with vice, and turned poor virtue out into the cold, was, perhaps, pardonable, seeing that the whole conception was designed to mirror life as it is, not as it ought to be; but the spectacle of an injured wife imploring the man who loves her to remain at hand as the guardian angel of the husband by whom she has been deceived, and of the said husband joining his entreaties to hers, leans, it must be confessed, rather towards the ridiculous than the sublime, and there could be but little doubt as to the aspect in which it was likely to present itself to the Gallic mind. When Eugénie exclaimed, "You have proved that duty is dearer to you even than love," she

was answered by cries of "Parbleu!" and "Je crois bien!" from beyond the footlights; and George's grave "Yes, my friend; I ask of you this last sacrifice," was greeted with roars of laughter, above which rose a piercing whistle or two, and a few ironical shouts of "Bravo!"

With this mocking tumult ringing in his ears, Claud saw the curtain fall upon "Amour et Amitié," and knew that his labour was lost, and his drama irrevocably doomed. There have been more complete fiascoes; for the approval accorded to the opening scenes might be taken as counting for something; but there could be none more irretrievable. Claud needed neither the averted gaze of Varinka, who had enveloped herself in her wraps, and was quitting the box precipitately, nor the ominous disappearance of all his quondam supporters to convince him of that. To Geneviève's whispered suggestion that some judicious excisions and alterations might yet secure a future for the play, he answered, without loss of composure, "No; it is like Humpty-dumpty; it has had a great fall, and not all the king's horses nor all the king's men can set it up again. The best thing we can do is not to say another word about the matter." He had played his trump-card and lost the trick, and now it only

remained to pay and look pleasant. That part of his duty he was glad to find that he was able to perform.

Has it ever happened to the reader to be compelled to hide some acute mental or physical suffering through long hours, under a mask of smiling cheerfulness—sustained, the while, by that comfortable inward glow which may be termed, according to taste, Spartan fortitude or gratified self-love? If so, he will know what it was that enabled Claud to attend the sumptuous supper which the Princess had ordered in anticipation of his triumph, and to listen without flinching to the words of condolence and comfort meted out to him by his neighbours. They spared him nothing, those well-meaning, amiable blockheads. He had to hear a dozen polite criticisms of his piece; to be told of a score of good reasons for its failure. "Monsieur, your play is admirable. It has only this defect, which I perceived at the outset." "Monsieur, I venture to predict that you will succeed in dramatic composition yet; but in future you must be careful to avoid one palpable error." "Monsieur, I foresaw the danger that lay before you when you read us your excellent piece," and so on. The Princess, who had dis-

played such an unexpected familiarity with the Book of Job earlier in the evening, must have been forcibly reminded of Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar as she listened to them. Well might Claud have turned upon them, like his long-suffering prototype, with "No doubt but ye are the people, and wisdom shall die with you;" but he refrained, and did not even remind them that they had taken up a very different tone at the time when their strictures might have been of some use to him. Later, when the champagne had circulated freely, they dropped criticism, and became delightfully encouraging. What, after all, was one failure at the outset of a career? Who had not failed once or twice in his life? Was not Racine's first tragedy a failure? Did not Corneille have to struggle for a matter of twelve years before the Academy would open its doors to him? Really it seemed as if almost every writer of any repute must have begun in this distressing fashion. The critics grew quite merry over their historical instances, and drank Claud's health with as much enthusiasm as if he had been already crowned with the laurels which they promised him.

Among this sanguine company Eugène Poinsot was conspicuous by his absence.

During the disturbance of the third act Geneviève had seen him make an eloquent grimace at the audience, and slip noiselessly away; after which he had not returned. It has already been said that M. Poinsot abhorred the sight of affliction in any form. Like the little man in the old-fashioned weather-glasses, he was only visible when the sky was clear, and popped out of sight on the approach of a storm; and since nothing that he could have said or done could, under the circumstances, have brought any great solace to his young friend, he perhaps displayed as much delicacy as good sense in absenting himself from the Princess's supper-party. This Claud understood; but such is the unreasonableness of human nature that it caused him a pang when he looked round in vain for the merry, smooth-shaven face which had beamed good-will upon him every day for so many weeks past. We do not wish our friends to intrude upon us when we are in trouble; we are aware that it is best, both for their sake and for our own, that they should leave us to ourselves for a season; yet it is not altogether pleasant to see them skurrying across the street upon our approach, and one is sometimes sensible of an inclination to call out to them that calamity is,

after all, not contagious. And, indeed, one of the chief considerations which prompt the world at large to shun the afflicted is that speech and silence are felt to be alike offensive to them. Of all his sympathizers the one to whom Claud felt most grateful was M. Hirsch, who contented himself with gripping the young man's hand warmly at parting, and saying, "Cheer up. In my hard life, I have passed through much worse times than ever you are likely to see, and, as you perceive, I have survived. Believe me, a thick skin is a great blessing, and there is but one way of obtaining it."

These were the last words that Claud heard, as he followed his wife down the staircase to the doorway, where the Princess's *coupé* was waiting to take them home. Did Nina share the sentiments of M. Poinsot, and was it delicacy that kept her silent, as she lay back in the corner of that luxurious equipage, which bore her so swiftly through the streets? She and her husband had not exchanged a word or a look since leaving the theatre. At the supper-table they had been so placed that they could not see one another, and during the quarter of an hour that had been spent in the *salon* afterwards, before Varinka, who was independent

of sleep, had led the way to the card-room, they had each formed the centre of a separate little group. Now they were alone; yet they seemed to have nothing to say to one another. It was an odd kind of causeless estrangement that had sprung up between them—an estrangement of which one of them had long been aware, but of which the other was only beginning to be vaguely conscious—an estrangement arising out of no quarrel that could be made up again, but out of that far more fatal drifting apart of which the sources lie too deep to be easily discerned. It may have been an undefined dread that caused them to sit speechless, side by side, each waiting for the other to say the first word.

At length, when the carriage had clattered across the Place du Havre, and was mounting the ascent of the rue d'Amsterdam at a somewhat reduced speed, Claud broke the silence with a slightly forced laugh.

"So it has been a disappointment," said he.

Her reply startled him a little. "Yes," she said; "it is the beginning."

"The beginning of what? What do you mean, Nina? I don't understand."

In truth he did not understand; nor could she enlighten him.

"Don't let us say anything more about it to-night," she exclaimed suddenly. "Talking does no good; and—and I am so tired."

"Nina, my darling, what is it?"

"Nothing," she answered; "only I am so sorry—and I wanted to tell you; but I was afraid."

"You little goose!—afraid of what?"

"I don't know. I shall be all right to-morrow morning," she said, straightening herself up and drying her eyes. "To-night I am in the dumps—it doesn't often happen to me to be in the dumps, does it?—and somehow I feel as if everything must go wrong now."

Claud was a good deal moved. Without quite knowing why, he had never looked for much sympathy from his wife; and now—also without quite knowing why—he felt a twinge of self-reproach.

"Things shall not go wrong," he cried. "We must have courage, and make them go right. As for me, I care for nothing, so long as you love me."

And so they two climbed the long stairs that led to their home, a little comforted.

A fine, cold rain was falling, and the dawn was just breaking, grey and mournful, over the succession of tall white houses and slate roofs

and chimneys which they could see from their windows. It was that most silent hour of the twenty-four which immediately precedes sunrise. The streets were deserted, the windows all shuttered, and no smoke rose from the tall chimneys. But soon the thousands who now lay sleeping would begin to stir; and in a few hours they would have set forth, each to take up his proper burden—to perform the daily task which must be gone through, be the worker sad or merry, the weather sunny or grey. Before this couple among the rest, lay grey days—days of trial and despondency—and it behoved them to look into their hearts, if haply any of the courage of which Claud had spoken might be found there; for the time when it was to be required of them was at hand.

CHAPTER II.

THE INDISCRETION OF M. HIRSCH.

THAT thorough-paced and most unprincipled rascal Hirsch was becoming so domesticated under the soft influences that were brought to bear upon him in the Boulevard Malesherbes; he behaved himself, when there, with so much modesty and propriety, and showed so little inclination to wander elsewhere in search of disreputable diversions, that the Princess openly declared her fear that their poor friend was not long for this world. When and where she had formed her opinion of M. Hirsch's character she did not say; but it was evidently no very exalted one; nor, for that matter, did the man himself seek to disguise the fact that his life had been that of an adventurer in every sense of the word.

He used sometimes to shock and horrify Miss Potts by reminiscences of his lawless

doings in Texas, in Mexico, in the republics of South America, where, according to his own account, he must have been pursuing an unbroken career of crime for ten years or more. The banks he had broken, the pigeons he had plucked, the bottles of raw spirits which he had disposed of at one sitting for a small wager, the creditors whom he had left unpaid—all these, he gave it to be understood, were connected with the more venial class of offences which might be laid to his charge. It has been asserted that there is one depth of moral turpitude to which no man has ever yet been heard to plead guilty, namely, that of cheating at cards. M. Hirsch must have been the single exception which proved this general rule; for he admitted, without blushing, that he was the inventor of an ingenious system, by means of which he had been able to win much money at games both of skill and chance. "They robbed me for a whole year, that *canaille*," he would remark explanatorily; "and then for nine years I robbed them. I always do my best to suit myself to my company."

One can imagine Miss Potts's uplifted hands, her trembling ringlets and quivering cap-strings. But what distressed her even more than this was M. Hirsch's cool confession that, upon two

separate occasions, he had found it expedient to draw his revolver, and shoot a fellow-traveller dead in cold blood.

"This is terrible!" she would exclaim.

"It is indeed, my dear lady," Hirsch would answer, wagging his head mournfully. "It is most terrible; and I assure you that it pained me very greatly at the time. The only thing that could have pained me more than killing those gentlemen would have been their killing me. It is true that they would inevitably have done so, if I had allowed them time; but that, as I perceive you think, is but a poor excuse. When I reflect upon all the sins that I have committed in my life, I am astonished at myself —I am indeed. My history is a truly disgraceful one, and I feel that repentance comes too late."

Such remarks as these, enunciated in a feeble voice, between two fits of coughing, put Geneviève in mind of nothing so much as the confessions of Reineke Fuchs. And indeed the speaker, reclining in his arm-chair, the pensive expression of his features belied by a sly twinkle in the corner of his little blinking eyes, bore no slight resemblance to that wily quadruped. Making all allowances for a highly coloured self-portraiture, designed, no doubt,

chiefly with the object of causing Miss Potts to shake in her shoes, there could be no question but that the man was a consummate rascal; yet there was something about his rascality which was not altogether repellent. Rascality—or, at all events, certain forms of it—would appear to have an occult claim upon human sympathy. Who, for instance, can read of the infamous exploits of Reneke Fuchs, to whom M. Hirsch has just been compared, without at once ranging himself upon the side of their hero? And has not the very word "rogue" come to bear an almost endearing significance?—while "roguish" is such a playful, innocent sort of adjective that it has all but fallen into disuse, as applied to adult humanity.

Hirsch, then, when in his more expansive moods, was far from being a disagreeable companion. Miss Potts herself owned to a reluctant interest in this hardened offender, and would speak of him behind his back with sighings and groanings and many a reference to the eleventh hour, and brands plucked from the burning, and so forth. Geneviève went a step further, and roundly declared that she liked M. Hirsch very well as he was. She had taken him under her especial protection. Ever since that evening when she had driven him up to Southlands in

her pony-carriage, and when he had been so inhumanly turned out of doors by her father, he had been to her in some sort, like Touchstone's Audrey, a poor thing of her own. She professed to have discovered good points in his character which were not apparent to the world at large; and it is certain that if there was a soft place in Hirsch's battered old heart, Miss Gervis had gained possession of it.

When he was alone with her—and that was no unfrequent occurrence; for the restless little Princess was out of doors from morning to night—he did not dwell upon his past life, nor entertain her with a catalogue of crimes committed on the other side of the Atlantic. He asked for nothing better than to sit silent, and listen to her while she practised her violin, and when she was tired of that, to fall back upon conversation of a kind entirely different from the specimen set down above. And now it must be confessed that there was one topic upon which he was always ready to talk, and of which his companion was in no danger of wearying. Through what channel M. Hirsch had discovered how matters stood between Geneviève and Freddy Croft—whether through Miss Potts, whose inability to keep a secret was notorious, or through Varinka, who was

much vexed at this time by her step-daughter's discouragement of the advances of M. d'Arblay, an unexceptionable gentleman with a considerable fortune and a fine musical ear—signifies little; nor did Geneviève make any inquiry as to the sources of his information when—using, as he said, the privileges of a man old enough to be her father—he spoke to her upon the subject. The truth was that she was too much rejoiced to hear the sound of Freddy's name to care very greatly by whom it might happen to be uttered. M. Hirsch was, perhaps, hardly the confidant whom she would have chosen in preference to all others, but he was far better than no confidant at all; moreover, in treating of this delicate matter, he displayed a greater amount of tact than might have been expected of him. Upon the question of the abstract advisability of the match he did not presume to enter, further than by incidentally expressing his conviction that neither "this young Sir Croft" nor any other man whom he had ever met was worthy to be the husband of mademoiselle; he confined himself to gently leading the conversation on to the subject of England, to asking Geneviève questions as to the manner of her life at Southlands, to declaring his personal admiration of the English as a people,

and his regret that he had never been able to make himself better acquainted with their country. In short, he managed, without impertinence, to give the girl an opportunity of breaking the silence which had become well-nigh intolerable to her, and thus afforded her many an hour of happiness. It was his way of showing gratitude for her recognition of an outcast. And so it came about that something approaching to a fast friendship sprang up between these two very dissimilar persons.

Early in the month of June, on one of those fresh, cloudless mornings which cause the hearts of those who dwell in cities to hunger and thirst after a sight of green fields, M. Hirsch surprised Geneviève by asking her to take a walk with him. She hesitated a moment; for Varinka, while reserving to herself a liberty of action which knew no limits, had very rigid notions as to the rules by which the conduct of young girls ought to be governed, and it was doubtful whether she would have considered even M. Hirsch sufficiently advanced in years to sanction his appearance in the streets with her step-daughter, unless under the eye of a third person.

"I will ask Miss Potts whether she would like to go out," Geneviève said, moving towards the door.

But Hirsch stopped her with a supplicating gesture. "Mademoiselle, I implore you!—She irritates my nerves, that dear and respectable Potts; she has a manner of pronouncing her words which acts like a magnet upon the worst side of my nature—not to mention that those long and bony legs stride over the ground at a pace which I could never hope to maintain, with the fragment of lung that remains to me. Do not refuse me an hour of peace and quiet in the sunshine. It is the whim of an invalid, who will not have many more fancies to gratify on this side of the grave."

Geneviève was not proof against this appeal. Soon afterwards, she and M. Hirsch had mounted the Boulevard Malesherbes, had passed the gilded gates of the Parc Monceaux, and were strolling along those trim gravel walks and among those charming, if somewhat conventional, combinations of foliage and verdure, rockery and carpet-patterned flower-beds, which the Republic has inherited from the Empire. The Parc Monceaux was crowded, as it commonly is on a fine summer's day. Children were chasing one another along the walks; rosy-cheeked Norman nurses were seated, knitting and chattering, on the benches provided by M. Haussmann and his successors;

everywhere were loungers of the true Parisian *bourgeois* type, wandering hither and thither, without aim or object, yet not in the least bored—specimens of that contentedly idle class of *petits rentiers* to which London possesses no equivalent. M. Hirsch appeared to enjoy the whole scene immensely.

"What delicious sunshine!" he exclaimed. "What a good air! what a pretty little Arcadia! The sight of it is almost enough to make one feel young and virtuous. If only one did not know that the streets and houses of this wicked city were within a stone's throw!" Then, as if struck by a sudden idea—"If we were to take a carriage, and drive out to the Bois?" he hazarded.

But to this new proposition Geneviève demurred decidedly.

"What would Varinka say?" she asked, laughing.

"Mademoiselle, she will say nothing, for the sufficient reason that she will know nothing. Have you forgotten that she is to spend the whole day with her new friends the Karakoffs at Meudon? She was driving away as I entered —she and Madame Claud. They are made for one another, those two. A more delightful couple for all the purposes of society it would

be difficult to find; but as for being the husband of one of them!" M. Hirsch, by way of ending his sentence, shrugged his shoulders expressively.

"I don't think you would ever have been in much danger of that fate, M. Hirsch," said Geneviève, with dignity. For it seemed to her that her companion was allowing himself a little too much license of criticism.

He was not in the least offended by this direct snub. On the contrary, it appeared to afford him great amusement, and made him laugh so heartily that he brought on a return of his cough. He had hailed one of the little victorias which were creeping along the drive, while he was speaking, and he was so exhausted after his paroxysm of coughing that Geneviève could not, in common humanity, refuse to let him seat himself in it.

Five minutes later, Miss Gervis was being driven slowly down the Avenue Uhrich in a hired carriage, side by side with the greatest reprobate in Paris; and any one of the Princess Ouranoff's numerous acquaintances might have witnessed this remarkable spectacle. None of them, however, did witness it. At that hour of the day (it was not yet noon) they were probably only just thinking of getting out

of bed; and a large proportion of them, being people whose movements were governed by the laws of fashion, had already left Paris. There was, therefore, no real need for Geneviève to hold her parasol at such an angle as to conceal her features from the passers-by; although M. Hirsch approved of the precaution, assuring her that he fully appreciated the sacrifice which she was making in order to indulge his selfish whim, and was proportionately grateful to her. When they reached the Bois, he directed the coachman to turn away from that drive beside the lake which is the Parisian Ladies' Mile, and to follow one of the less-frequented alleys which lead towards the Pré Catelan; and as soon as they were well among the trees, he called a halt.

"With your permission, mademoiselle," said he, "we will get out now, and walk a little way. Ah! we are better here than in the Parc Monceaux, are we not? We hear no more the perpetual rattle of the streets; we have the shade —the green trees—the birds overhead. Could you not almost fancy yourself in your own home at Southlands?" (He pronounced the word "Sousselan;" but it did not sound the less pleasantly in Geneviève's ears, and the prefix of "home" was especially grateful to her.)

"One could walk here all the afternoon, and not tire," he added.

He tired, however, soon enough, and was glad to take advantage of a friendly bench to rest himself upon. Presently he uttered an exclamation of dismay. "*Sapristi!* what stupidity! I have left my purse, with two thousand francs in it, in the carriage. I must go and recover it at once. Be so kind as to wait where you are for a few minutes, mademoiselle; I will join you directly."

And M. Hirsch hastened away as fast as his legs would carry him.

Geneviève had no objection to remaining where she was. She leant back on the bench, enjoying the solitude, and the whispering of the breeze through the branches, and the sunlight dancing among the young leaves, and all the delicious sights and sounds of summer; and if she did not trace much resemblance between those recently planted groves and the old oaks of England, her thoughts were probably not prevented on that account from straying to the land that she loved. For the first five minutes she put M. Hirsch out of her mind altogether; but when five more elapsed, and he gave no sign, she became rather uneasy, and at the end of a quarter of an hour she recollected, with

some alarm, that she had heard a carriage driving rapidly away immediately after he had left her. What could have happened? Had the coachman discovered the two thousand francs, and decamped with them, and had M. Hirsch forgotten all about her, and started in hot pursuit? She was taking counsel with herself as to what she had better do next, when the crunching of hastily approaching footsteps made itself heard upon the gravel, and presently a form hove in sight which was certainly not that of M. Hirsch. Geneviève's heart gave a great bound and then stood still. Was she dreaming, or could it possibly be Freddy Croft who was hurrying up, with both hands extended, to meet her?

She was not long kept in doubt. Freddy Croft indeed it was, in a very nice new suit of clothes, with a rose in his buttonhole, and that jolly little full moon of a face of his beaming all over with delight.

"It's me," he said—as though there were any necessity for making that ungrammatical announcement.

And here I cannot help breaking off for a moment to remark upon the hard fate which will not permit me to dodge the love-scenes that are for ever cropping up in the course

of the veracious history upon which I am engaged. As I observed upon a former occasion, I am wholly unfitted for this kind of work, and I should expose myself to the just scorn and ridicule of my readers, were I to attempt it. It is true that in connection with the meeting with which we are now concerned there are no kissings or embracings to be recorded—for it is not to be supposed that Miss Gervis would allow herself to be embraced by a young man to whom she was not engaged, and I have the best authority for stating that Freddy's reverence for this lady was so great that he would never have thought of greeting her otherwise than in the most decorous manner—but of tender words and fond glances, of reiterated queries and ardent vows, there was doubtless a sufficient interchange. And these, if you please, we will skip.

The colloquy may be taken up at the point where Geneviève, beginning to recover her mental balance, requested Freddy to give some account of himself. "Where do you come from? How do you happen to be in Paris?" she asked.

"Oh, I ran over with another fellow to do the Grand Prix," replied that ingenuous youth.

"I mean," he added, correcting himself, "I made that the excuse for coming. You may guess whether I hadn't a hope of some better luck than backing the winner. I thought I ought to have an excuse of some kind, because of what you said, you know, about our not meeting till the two years were up; but, being here, I couldn't have gone away without having one look at you. If the worst had come to the worst, I meant to have gone boldly and called upon the Princess, though Claud says the odds are she would have shown me the door."

"She would not have done that; but of course we should not have been left alone together. And I don't think I ought to stay here any longer now. What an extraordinary piece of good fortune it was that brought us both to this same spot—of all places in the world—at the same moment! After this, I shall always have a lingering reliance upon chance."

"Well—it wasn't altogether chance," Freddy confessed, with a side-glance of mingled glee and apprehension.

"Not chance! what else could it possibly be? You cannot have had any idea that I should be in the Bois this morning; for I did not know it myself when I left the house."

"I suppose not," said Freddy, much amused. "By George! what an old dodger! eh?"

"What do you mean? Of whom are you speaking?" asked Geneviève, a glimmering of the truth beginning to dawn upon her.

"Why, our old friend Rags-and-tatters, to be sure! Not that he deserves his name nowadays. Fur all over him, and a stick with a great big gold knob at the top—no end of a swell. Been robbing a bank or something, I expect. Never mind! he's a right good chap; and if ever he wants a friend, he may count upon me. You see, I went and looked up Claud yesterday—jolly little crib he's got. I say, don't you think Nina has altered for the worse since her marriage?"

"No," answered Geneviève consideringly; "I can't say that I notice any difference in her. I think she was always—much what she is now." In fact, no great feeling of amity subsisted between these two ladies.

"H'm! she wasn't over civil to me," Freddy went on. "Hardly took the trouble to speak to me. Well, as I was saying, I had a talk with Claud; and he was dead against my trying to see you. Said it wouldn't do, and the Princess wouldn't like it, and one thing and another. Altogether, I went away rather down on my

luck, and strolled off to the Boulevard Malesherbes. I thought there was just a chance of your looking out of the window, or that perhaps you might be going out to dinner somewhere, and that I should see you getting into the carriage. So I hung about under the trees there, to the great disgust of your *concierge*, who looked at me as if he suspected that I was up to no good; and after a bit, out toddled old Rags. I don't think I should have recognized him; but he spotted me directly, and before I knew where I was, he had got me into his brougham, and was driving me off to his hotel to dinner. And a very good dinner he gave me too. Well; in the evening, you know, we got talking about things, and—and the long and the short of it was that he told me that, if I would meet him at the restaurant in the Pré Catelan at twelve o'clock to-day, he would be able to give me some good news, he hoped. Which accounts for my being here at this moment," concluded Freddy complacently.

Geneviève was very properly shocked at the duplicity of M. Hirsch. She was extremely angry with him, she declared; she would never forgive him for having taken her in as he had done. But the voice in which this alarming statement was made seemed to leave room for

a hope that M. Hirsch's offence might ultimately be condoned.

"And now the question is, how am I to get home? Neither you nor M. Hirsch appear to have thought of that. I suppose the only thing I can do is to walk until I meet a *fiacre;* and that will hardly be on this side of the Arc de Triomphe."

"Oh, but you are not thinking of going home yet!" exclaimed Freddy with a very long face.

"I must. Do you know what time it is?"

"By Jove!—past two o'clock. I thought I was getting uncommonly hungry," said Freddy, innocently. "But there isn't the slightest necessity for your hurrying back. The Princess is out at Meudon, you know."

"Did M. Hirsch tell you that too?"

"Of course he did. It's only justice to Rags to say that he's a man who knows what he's about. Do you know what I wish you would do?"

"Something utterly impossible, most likely."

"No, it isn't. In fact, I think it would be very wrong of you to refuse; for I know you have taken nothing in the shape of nourishment this morning, except a cup of coffee and a roll, and you must be pretty nearly starving by this

time. Now, there is a little restaurant on one of the islands on the lake—the sort of place where one would be certain not to meet a soul one had ever seen before—and they could get an omelette, or something of that kind, ready for us there in a few minutes. Don't you think we might?"

Certainly not. Geneviève would not hear of such a thing. However, she allowed herself to be drawn into a discussion upon the point; and the result justified the conclusion of the oft-quoted proverb of "Château qui parle et femme qui écoute."

"Never mind Miss Potts for this once," Freddy pleaded. "Miss Potts is much too good a fellow to tell tales, even if she finds out where you have been; and I don't see why she should find out. And when shall we have another day together? Not for eighteen long months, perhaps." He ended with an argument which has always carried a certain degree of weight with it since the time when the world began: "No one will ever know."

At length, therefore, Miss Gervis was persuaded into what cannot be described otherwise than as a highly incorrect course of procedure; and it must, I fear, be added that she has never, up to this present time of writing, repented pro-

perly of her weakness. For the two hours which she spent with Freddy on that cockney-fied little island were two of the happiest she had ever known. The restaurant was of that class at which, on Saturday afternoons, two or three of the turbulent wedding-parties so dear to the Parisian proletariat are apt to be encountered; but as it was the middle of the week, our friends had the whole place to themselves, and were served in the open air by a greasy and obsequious waiter, who, to Freddy's huge delight, addressed Geneviève as "madame" at every other word. The omelette with which they were regaled was burnt, the cutlets were tough, and the wine was execrable; but neither of them took any heed of these small drawbacks. They pronounced everything delightful, even down to the cocks and hens of the establishment, which gathered round their table, and fought for the bread-crumbs that Geneviève scattered amongst them. Then, the bill having been paid, and the greasy waiter tipped with a liberality which caused him to stare and grin from ear to ear, they wandered up into the pine-woods; and there, seating himself upon the dry ground at Geneviève's feet, Freddy related to her his experiences of the last six months. He told her how he had missed her

through every hour of the day; how he had written continually to Claud, and had received only an occasional and meagre acknowledgment of his letters in reply; how he had been trying hard to fit himself to be her constant associate; how he had interested himself in the welfare of his tenantry, introduced improvements into the management of the home farm, and devoted a stated portion of his time to the study of standard works.

"I had to drop poetry, though," he confessed, with a look of comical penitence. "It was no go. That sort of thing is altogether above me. Scott's the only poet I can stand. I gave them all a fair trial too; but when I got to Wordsworth's 'Excursion,' I felt it was quite hopeless, and I threw up the sponge."

Mill's "Political Economy," to which he had next had recourse, as being presumably an unimaginative composition, had likewise proved too hard a nut for him to crack; but, on the other hand, he had found that he was able to read Macaulay's "Essays" with pleasure and profit. "I can do very well with Macaulay," he said, in a tone of modest exultation.

How many times afterwards Geneviève lived through that sunny afternoon again, and felt the warm breeze on her cheek, and smelt the

resinous fragrance of the pines, and saw those frank blue eyes and that joyous, boyish face upturned to hers! Faces of that kind, which have no lines or traces of care upon them, usually belong to selfish people; and selfishness —at all events when it practically affects our own comfort—is a hideous thing; yet merry faces are pleasanter to look upon than sad ones; and it is certain that Geneviève would not have wished her admirer's to be altered in any particular. She did not say much. It made her perfectly happy to sit and listen to Freddy's loquacity, which never stood in need of more than the slenderest encouragement. He gave her full information of all that had taken place in Lynshire since her departure: he told her how there had been "no end of a rumpus" in the Lynchester household (cause not assigned); how Lady Lynchester had sought the protection of her own family, and had only been induced at last to return to her husband through the intervention of Lord Courtney, who had undertaken, for the credit of the county, to smooth matters over; how Mr. Flemyng had given a lecture, in the town-hall at Beachborough, upon the Antiquity of Man, in the course of which he had fallen foul of the Book of Genesis and Admiral Bagshawe,

insomuch that the latter had loudly denounced him as an anti-Christian agitator, and had actually threatened to drag him from the platform; how General Blair had had a stroke, but was recovering; how Miss Pennefather had been menaced with an action for slander by some maligned person; and a great deal more in the same strain. He was also able to give her the latest news of Mr. Gervis, with whom he was surprised to hear that she held no direct communication. Mr. Gervis, it appeared, had been twice at Southlands for a day or two during the winter, and had been last seen in London, "looking pretty dismal," Freddy said. "I expect he don't find it very good fun living all by himself. When we're married, we'll often have him down at Croft, and get a lot of other antediluvians to meet him and cheer him up a bit."

When they were married! It may be imagined what a wide field for plans and projects was opened up by the bare mention of this prospective felicity, and how little account either of them took of the flying moments. Not until the sun's rays had acquired a perceptible declination did Miss Gervis awake to a full sense of her position. She consulted her watch, and gave a cry of

dismay. There was just, and only just, time enough for her to reach home before the dinner hour. Somewhat sobered, Freddy hailed the little boat which had brought them to the island some hours before, and once on the other side, they hurried along the road towards Paris as fast as they could walk, till, by good luck, they encountered an empty *fiacre*. Geneviève jumped in, and, after a brief leave-taking, was driven away, remembering, as most people do at such times, a hundred things that she had left unsaid, a hundred questions that she had left unasked, and too much occupied with memories and regrets to think with apprehension of the scene which in all probability awaited her in the Boulevard Malesherbes.

In the drawing-room she found M. Hirsch, seated in his accustomed place and reading an evening paper. He did not look up, as she drew nearer to him; nor did Miss Potts, who entered the room from the opposite door at this moment, and who wore an aspect of portentous gravity, ask her any question as to how she had spent the day. This significant silence prepared Geneviève to some extent for what was coming, and she was not surprised when Varinka dashed in, like a little steam-engine, dragging her long silk train behind her.

"Geneviève—wretched girl! where have you been? Tell me the truth; I insist upon it!"

There was no occasion to insist. The accused, who did not know how to prevaricate, told the truth unhesitatingly, and with a coolness which visibly startled her small audience.

"I have been in the Bois de Boulogne with Sir Frederick Croft," said she. Neither more nor less than that.

The Princess cast her eyes up to the ceiling, clasped her hands, and let them fall, backs uppermost, before her, with a tragic gesture worthy of Mdlle. Thoméry herself, while she addressed a succession of intermittent apostrophes to space.

"Why is it that misfortunes like this happen to me, and to no one else in the world? . . . Who would ever have believed it! . . . When Nina told me that that man was here, and warned me to be careful, did I not laugh?—did I not say that I would answer for Geneviève as I would answer for myself? . . . Ah! this is a lesson to me—a cruel lesson! . . . It is written, then, that I am never to be able to trust any one!"

These plaintive ejaculations eliciting no rejoinder, the speaker made a sudden descent from the abstract to the specific, and assailed

Geneviève with a torrent of reproaches. How could she have the face to stand there, looking as if she was positively proud of what she had done? Was she aware that she had disgraced herself? Yes; disgrace was the word. If this terrible story became known, it would never be forgotten—of that she might be sure! And the deceit of it—that was the worst of all—the deliberate deceit of it!

At this juncture M. Hirsch raised himself a little in his chair, holding up his hand, as if to impose silence; and to Geneviève's no small surprise, Varinka suddenly stopped short.

"Dear Princess," said M. Hirsch in his most honeyed accents, "we can all make allowances for your natural vivacity; and it is easy to understand that, being yourself incapable of deceit, it must be especially painful to you to be deceived. Only, it would perhaps be well, before saying any more, to convince yourself of who it is that has deceived you. The sole culprit, madame, is the unworthy individual who now sits before you. It was I who hatched this execrable plot, alone and unaided; it was I who gave a rendezvous to Sir Croft in the Bois, and who inveigled mademoiselle into driving there with me. It is I who humbly congratulate myself upon my success, and who

am prepared to received the full brunt of your wrath. Scold, my dear madame—scold to your heart's content. Do not spare me; you know that I have the hide of a rhinoceros."

If anything could have exceeded the impudence of this speech, it would have been the manner of its delivery. M. Hirsch's little eyes were twinkling with malice; his chin was thrust forward; his lips were drawn back in a jeering grin which covered his cheeks with innumerable small wrinkles; his whole air was that of a man who knows how to provoke a quarrel and is determined to seek one. Varinka, however, for some reason or other, did not choose to take up the challenge.

"It is a waste of breath to scold people like you," she said, with a short laugh. "You do mischief for the sake of being malevolent. If your object was to annoy me, you have the satisfaction of knowing that you have succeeded. It is a matter of course that you should never have considered what a much worse injury you might be doing to Geneviève than to me."

Therewith she turned her back upon him, and suddenly lapsing into tenderness, flew at Geneviève, embraced her, wept over her, and declared that, if she had made use of any unkind words, it was only because she had

wished her dearest child to realize the terrible risk to which she had exposed herself.

"Never deceive me again!—anything but that!" she cried, with heartrending simplicity. "Wound me, disappoint me in any way that you please; but at least let there be no concealments between us. And another time, do not allow yourself to be persuaded into a rash action without first consulting one who loves you more than any stranger can do." And Geneviève, who was really very much ashamed of herself, readily gave the desired promise.

Under cover of this affecting reconciliation M. Hirsch quietly withdrew; and shortly afterwards, Varinka, who was going to dine out, and had already kept the carriage twenty minutes at the door, rushed back to her room to wash away the traces of tears from her eyes and to powder her flushed cheeks.

Then Miss Potts felt it incumbent upon her to take up her parable; but Miss Potts's lectures were never of a very formidable description, and Geneviève may safely be left to receive from this faithful ally the reproof which her behaviour unquestionably merited.

CHAPTER III.

CLOUDS IN THE RUE D'AMSTERDAM.

One afternoon during the preceding autumn, when the Princess had been sitting on the sands at Trouville, her attention had been arrested by the movements of one of those little beetles known to children as the devil's coach-horses, which, after the manner of its kind, was painfully scaling cliffs and precipices of sand, only to lose its foothold at the summit and roll back into the abyss from which it had started, carrying a small avalanche with it. After watching these miniature labours of Sisyphus for some minutes, the Princess had grown irritated at the spectacle of so much wasted energy, and had flicked the ugly little animal impatiently away with the tip of her parasol. "To think that there are such stupid beasts in creation!" she had exclaimed. "Is it not enough to make all one's muscles ache only to look at them?"

LIBRARY

"So little sympathy with an innocent fellow-labourer, madame?" M. Hirsch had retorted, with his malicious grin. "For my part, I have met with ladies in the world who much resembled beetles—who were not less blind, not less persistent, and whose exertions were often quite as fatiguing and ridiculous to watch."

The Princess had stared and laughed, not perceiving that it was of her that the fable was narrated; for assuredly blindness was the last defect that she would have attributed to herself. Had she been able, for a moment, to see herself as M. Hirsch and others saw her, she would, perhaps, have been somewhat saddened during that moment; though it may be doubted whether the lesson would have had any lasting influence upon her. It was her habit to form determinations rapidly, without the smallest prior consideration, and to stick to them doggedly, pertinaciously, until she either got what she wanted, or lost it beyond hope of recovery. That she thus undertook many a predestined and inevitable failure was of no importance to her comfort, since she never knew, nor could be convinced, that failure was inevitable; and her system had its advantages, in that it saved her from the wear and tear of reflection, and

from the misgivings with which more impressionable persons are apt to be afflicted.

Thus, having made up her mind that Geneviève was to marry M. d'Arblay, or, failing him, some equally suitable individual, her resolution was not for a moment shaken by Freddy Croft's flying visit to Paris and the practical proof afforded thereby that her step-daughter's affections were not yet free. It was a contretemps certainly ; but Varinka seldom wasted regrets upon the past, and the only effect produced upon her by this unlucky episode was to cause her to hasten her departure for Bagnères de Bigorre, where she had previously announced her intention of spending the summer months, and whither M. d'Arblay, whose parents inhabited a château in the neighbourhood of that watering-place, had already betaken himself.

And so there soon came a day on which the Princess, accompanied by her whole household, including M. Hirsch, and followed by a van-load of baggage, bade farewell to her beloved Paris for a season, and was borne away towards the Lyons terminus. Claud and Nina, who had promised to see the last of the travellers, were waiting on the steps as the little procession drove up ; and the leave-taking which subsequently took place between two of the

ladies in the waiting-room was of a most moving description. The Princess embraced her friend and ally repeatedly, squeezed out a tear or two as a last tribute of affection, and lamented—doubtless with perfect sincerity—that she could not take Paris to the Pyrenees with her.

"Why do you not come too?" she cried. "We should be quite a family party, and you would enliven our solitude in those wilds. Claud would have as much leisure as he wanted for writing, and you and I would make up riding-parties in the mountains. One does not lead a gay life at Bagnères, it is true; but the *mise-en-scène* is enchanting—quite what one sees in the picture-books. Guides in short jackets and scarlet *bérets*, who ride before you, cracking their whips, and old women carrying distaffs, and waterfalls, and glaciers, and flocks of sheep, and the rest. As soon as I am a little settled, I shall begin to look out for rooms for you. Yes; decidedly you must come."

But there were good and sufficient reasons, of which the Princess can hardly have been ignorant, to prevent Nina from visiting the Pyrenees, and, indeed, from leaving Paris at all. Clouds were drifting up over the once smiling skies of the Rue d'Amsterdam—clouds

of difficulty, clouds of debt, which every day assumed a more and more menacing aspect, and charged the domestic atmosphere with electricity. Any one who had watched this newly married pair during the weeks that had followed the downfall of *Amour et Amitié*, who had observed the anxious politeness that marked their intercourse, the unwillingness which they displayed to be left alone together, and the apprehensive glances which they exchanged from time to time, would have had no difficulty in guessing that each of them was in mortal terror of letting fall the spark which might bring about an explosion. Things had, in fact, come to such a pass that Claud trembled at the sound of the door-bell, and could never open the envelopes that lay beside his plate on the breakfast-table without a sickening sensation of dread. It was not only that household expenses were heavy and apparently not to be reduced; but bills of the kind known as "small," but which, in his case, only seemed to deserve the epithet as applied to the value of the articles charged for, had lately been pouring in upon him in alarming numbers. There were bills for gloves, bills for boots and shoes, bills for perfumery, and one several pages long from the hair-dresser, who, it

appeared, had been summoned, six evenings out of the seven during the past winter, to arrange Nina's golden-brown locks, and who, as Claud ruefully remembered, had been used to raise a most unpleasant smell of burning over his operations. Claud paid them all, not only without remonstrance, but without even mentioning them to his wife. It was, indeed, impossible that she should have defrayed all these debts out of her own slender allowance, and he could not bring himself to reproach her for having incurred them. Besides, what would have been the use of reproaches? What was done could not now be helped, and it was best that he should bear the worry of it alone. He cherished a hope that with the end of the ball-giving season some curtailment of expenditure would become possible; and in the mean time, being unable to maintain a cheerful demeanour, he was glad that his wife should spend the greater part of her days with Varinka and enjoy herself while she could. "Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die," he had said to himself, with a melancholy smile.

But now Varinka was gone, and Nina's occupation with her. Seed-time also was past, and harvest at hand. No wonder our young couple drove away from the station with very

serious faces, and did not find much to say to one another on the way home.

"Paris in the end of June is like Oxford in the Long Vacation: nobody ought to be there, unless he is in want of a decent excuse for blowing his brains out, or is so immersed in study that it doesn't signify to him where he is."

It was from Nina that *ennui* and lassitude drew this sentiment, one sultry morning about ten days after the Princess's departure. Claud looked up from his writing, and sighed; which only served to increase her long pent-up irritation.

"Oh, it is all very well for you," she said. "You have something to do."

Undaunted by his misadventure, Claud was once more busily engaged upon a play. He had also, at this time, found employment upon the staff of a small newspaper, for which he wrote articles at I forget what infinitesimal rate of payment. It was, in truth, less for the sake of remuneration than for that of work that he kept up his connection with it. He met Nina's eyes with a look of puzzled concern.

"I'm afraid you must find this sort of life almost intolerable," he said; "but perhaps it won't last long. If I have any luck, I ought

to be making money by this time next year, and then we shall be able to go away, like other people. I wish I could think of some amusement for you now; but really I don't know what there is."

"There are Musard's concerts in the evenings," suggested Nina. "It isn't wildly exciting; but at least one sees human beings there; and anything is better than sitting at home, with one's hands before one."

"H'm! You see, the evenings are my best time for writing."

It will be perceived that Mrs. Gervis's vision of conjugal felicity had been definitively abandoned by this time.

"Oh, how I *hate* writing!" she exclaimed, with a sudden outburst of revolt. "How I detest the sound of a pen scratching over the paper! I wish there were no pens in the world, and no paper or ink either! I'm sure nobody would lose much. No, I don't mean that," she added hastily, coming closer to him, and passing her hand lightly over his hair. "Poor, tired old fellow! it is horrid of me to grumble, when you are working so hard. But it *is* dull."

It certainly was. All Nina's acquaintances were away; no one came to see her, nor was

there any one whom she could visit. The southern aspect of the little flat in the Rue d'Amsterdam, which had prepossessed its occupants so much in its favour in the winter time, rendered it hot and stuffy now; and to sit all the day long behind closed shutters, with nothing to do but to read novels, is, it must be admitted, a regimen calculated to depress the spirits of the most cheerful of people. It is hardly surprising that Nina's thoughts should have reverted occasionally with something of regret to the shady lawn at the Moated House and her hammock under the cedar-tree, and to the neighbours of whose society she had once professed herself so weary.

There are, however, worse things in the world than dulness, as Claud discovered, when he received, that same evening, an intimation from his bankers that he had overdrawn to the extent of four hundred pounds odd, together with a request that he would restore the balance at his earliest convenience. And then, since misfortunes never come singly, he was informed that a person wished to speak to him—which person, on being ushered in, announced himself, with many bows and apologies, as the representative of the upholsterers from whom Nina's carpets and sofas had been ordered six

months before, and stated that he was instructed by his principals to invite monsieur to regulate his little account. This was precisely what Claud had been dreading for some time past. In the beginning of the year he had received his upholsterer's bill—which, it is needless to say, surpassed his utmost apprehensions in amount—and, finding it too painful an object for contemplation, had thrust it away out of sight, and, as far as possible, out of mind. Latterly, however, being tormented continually by visions of creditors, known and unknown, he had asked himself more than once what in the world he should do if these people were to press for payment. And now the worst had come; his fears were realized. There stood the man, smiling and deferential, the first dun Claud had had to face in his life, and this novel experience was so disagreeable to him that he displayed his agitation in a most injudicious manner.

Nevertheless, he made a feeble effort at taking up a high tone. He was very much surprised, he said, at being annoyed in this way. As it happened, it would be rather inconvenient to him to pay so large a sum at that particular moment. He should have imagined that the recommendation of the

Princess Ouranoff would have been a sufficient guarantee of his solvency. Surely it was very unusual to make these demands within such a short time as six months after the execution of the order.

The man interrupted him. "Pardon, monsieur! not at all unusual. It is the invariable custom of the firm to present all accounts for payment half-yearly." (He might have added that this custom obtained only with reference to needy dwellers on fourth storeys.) "With old customers, and families who honour us with extensive orders, we naturally deal differently; but at Paris there is such a constant coming and going, so many strangers spend a few months here and then go away—often, alas! without leaving an address behind them—monsieur will conceive that it has been necessary for us to adopt a strict rule."

Poor Claud did not at all understand how to deal with this importunate person. "And supposing that I cannot comply with your rule?" he asked.

"In that case—— But I permit myself to hope that no such emergency will arise."

"Never mind your hope," said Claud; "supposing it does arise?"

"*Mon Dieu,* monsieur, we are not more dis-

posed to give away our property than other people. In the last instance we should be compelled, most reluctantly, to resort to legal measures."

This was indeed terrible. "Well," said Claud, after a pause, during which he had had time to draw an agonizing mental picture of himself in the bankruptcy court, "you had better tell your master that I will call upon him shortly. He is putting me to a good deal of trouble; but he will get his money."

The man apologized profusely. Monsieur would comprehend that he was only a subordinate; his duty was simply to obey orders. Might he mention a date for monsieur's visit?

"We will say a fortnight hence," answered Claud firmly. "I told you before that I had not the sum by me at this moment." And he was much relieved when this postponement was acceded to without protest.

Having thus contrived to materially damage his credit, he got rid of his unwelcome visitor.

Half an hour afterwards Nina found him seated, with his head in his hands, the picture of mute despair, and had much ado to repress her laughter when she heard what was the matter. "My dear boy," she exclaimed, "you are as simple as a baby! Do you really

believe that people discharge their debts twice a year? Why, one might as well pay over the counter at once. The best thing you can do is to go down to this man's shop to-morrow morning, and tell him that, if he has the impudence to bother you before this time next year, you will never employ him again."

But Claud shook his head despondently. "It is all very well for people who have money in the bank to be plucky," said he; "but when one can't pay, one becomes a coward in spite of oneself. I know I shall have to meet this bill somehow; but how is more than I can imagine."

"Well," said Nina, after a moment, "if you are determined to pay—though I do think it is demoralizing to tradesmen to treat them in that way, and hardly fair upon other people—still, if you are determined, there is a means of doing it, you know, and a very simple one."

Claud stared, and asked, "What means, in the name of goodness?"

"You might write to Mr. Gervis, and ask him to help us out. I am sure he would."

"And I am perfectly sure that he would not."

"Then I don't see anything for it but the

workhouse. But, after all, why pay? Why not remain in debt? It doesn't hurt."

She was leaning against the wainscot beside the open window, plucking dead leaves from the plants that stood there, and watching them flutter down into the street below. Something in the utter indifference of her voice and attitude stung Claud into an unusual warmth of retort.

"Doesn't hurt!" he repeated; "but it does hurt—it hurts horribly! Is it possible that you don't feel the degradation of having to go to a shopkeeper, hat in hand, and beg for time?"

Nina turned her pretty face towards him with an odd look, shaking her head slightly. "I don't feel anything of the kind," she said. "I don't even know what you mean. Something wanting in me, I suppose. It is just what I have known from the first—you are too good for the likes of me, and now you are beginning to find it out. It is a thousand pities that I let you marry me."

"From the moment that you think so, of course it is so," returned Claud, who was too much hurt to have complete mastery over his tongue.

Nina did not answer immediately; she had resumed her occupation of pulling off the leaves,

and casting them idly into the air. "It can't be helped, though," she remarked at length. And then, after a break, "Claud!"

"Well."

"Don't you think it is about time for us to go back to England, and make it up with our relations, and partake of fatted calf? Papa is quite ready to kill his. In fact, he has killed it already. I heard from him this morning."

She felt in her pocket, and produced a letter, for which Claud held out his hand silently. They had not yet passed out of that early stage of matrimony in which letters addressed to either husband or wife are held to be common property. Nina relinquished this one — not without a slight movement of hesitation.

It was a long, not unkindly epistle, couched in Mr. Flemyng's customary pompous language. The upshot of it was that, so long as he had a house to call his own, his daughter would be welcome to use it as her home; that she was greatly missed by the whole household, and that he hoped that, when she came, she would make a long stay. Lynshire, he was sure, would be a pleasanter place of residence than Paris, at all events until the autumn. Two things struck Claud, as he perused this composition: in the first place, that it was an

obvious answer, not a spontaneous invitation; in the second place, that there was singularly little question of his existence in connection with the matter. "I shall be delighted to see you—and your husband too, if he is inclined to take a holiday, and if his literary avocations permit of his doing so," Mr. Flemyng wrote. He handed the letter back to his wife without a word, looking at her rather gravely. There was a faint flush on her cheeks.

"Yes," she said, answering his unspoken question, "I wrote to him. I thought you wouldn't mind; and—and it is so hot and so dull here. And now there is this bother about money, it is all the more desirable that we should make ourselves scarce for a time, and economize. Will you come?"

"I think not," answered Claud, with a somewhat grim smile. "I have my work to do here, and I could not well leave it—not to speak of the objections which some of our tradesmen might raise to losing sight of me. But I see no reason why you should not go. It is certainly, as you say, very desirable that we should economize, and there is no doubt at all about its being hot and dull in Paris. You had better write to your father, and say that you will join him in a few days."

If he expected Nina to protest that she could not go to England without him; if he thought she would feel that there was a certain cowardice in effecting her own escape and leaving him alone to battle with the enemy, he was mistaken. She jumped at his suggestion with rather cruel alacrity; her face broke out into smiles and dimples.

"Oh, how nice of you!" she exclaimed. "I was afraid you would make difficulties. What time is it? Shall I save the post if I write at once?"

She opened her blotting-book, and began to scribble off a note, talking all the time. "It will be so much the best plan—we really couldn't have gone on much longer as we have been doing lately."

"No; I really don't think we could," said Claud, drily.

"When I am gone, you will be able to live ever so much more cheaply. And after a time, when you are not quite so busy, you must run over too, and take a rest. Don't you long to see the sea again? We will go out prawning, as we used to do, when you come, and we will play lawn-tennis and have lots of fun. It will be just like last year. Oh, what an age ago all that seems now!"

Her high spirits lasted throughout the evening; her tongue wagged incessantly. Would Mr. Gervis be at Southlands? she wondered. If so, she would see him, and make a conquest of him forthwith. He could not be such an old wretch as to let them starve, when he was so rich himself, and when Claud had been working so hard to earn a living. What a nuisance money was, to be sure! "Do you know, I really thought we were going to have a serious quarrel this afternoon," she said once.

Claud tried to laugh. He was deeply offended, but he was too proud to show that he was so; or, if he did show that he was so, she did not notice it. He watched her and listened to her with amazement. It seemed to him that she had been suddenly changed by some malign enchantment. Was this the same Nina whom he had wooed in the Beachborough woods, and who had declared, only a few short months ago, that no two people could be more happy than he and she? He could hardly believe that she could really be overjoyed at the prospect of leaving him. But then he did not know how many weary hours of boredom she had had to endure.

At eleven o'clock she went off to bed, still

jubilant, leaving Claud to devote another two hours or so to work, according to his custom. He sat up, that evening, longer than usual ; but contemporary literature did not profit by his vigil. Facts, not fiction, engrossed all his thoughts—facts, supported by figures, and extenuated by no grateful illusion of hope. Striving by every imaginable means, through those doleful night-watches, to make a pint pot contain a quart measure, Claud was brought, as one result of this vain struggle, to acknowledge that Nina had been right, and that it was far better that she should leave Paris for a time. Another, and an even less palatable conviction forced upon him, was that she had been right in this also, that he must apply to his father for help. Beggary or bankruptcy—such were the two horns of the dilemma between which our unfortunate hero found himself placed. I suppose that most people so situated would have chosen the former alternative. If so, Claud only cast in his lot with the majority ; but the doing of it was a bitter pill for him to swallow. About two o'clock in the morning he seized a sheet of note-paper, and, in a sort of angry despair, dashed off the following laconic missive—

"Rue d'Amsterdam, Paris, 29th June.

"DEAR GOVERNOR,

"I have come to immeasurable grief. I have written a play which has been all but hissed off the stage; I have overdrawn every shilling of my next half-year's allowance, and, as far as I can make out, I owe at least as much again. Altogether, it will take about £800 to set me straight. Will you advance me the money? It is possible that I may be able to repay you by instalments; but I dare not make any promise, for everything goes askew with me. I haven't the face to add anything more. Please let me have a line to say Yes or No.

"Your affectionate son,

"CLAUD GERVIS."

Claud wrote this note at a great pace, as timorous people, who doubt their own resolution, take a dose of castor-oil, and without reading it over, put it into an envelope, addressed and stamped it. Having done this, he retired to bed, and, let us hope, to sleep. The letter was despatched in due course, and, notwithstanding Claud's expressed conviction that nothing would come of it, we may be sure that he knew very well which was the earliest post

that could bring him a reply, and was not a little disappointed when none came. The disappointment recurred the next day, and the next, and every day. Claud fell into that habit which is said to bring no luck with it, and which unquestionably entails much discomfort, of watching for the arrival of the postman. Twice in every twenty-four hours he suffered agonies of suspense if that functionary was a little behind his usual time, of despair if he passed the door, or, worse still, left a packet of letters, among which was not the one which should contain the awaited sentence.

It was indeed as a prisoner at the bar that Claud regarded himself—arraigned before the judgment-seat of one who bore the character of being impervious to appeals for pity. He knew that Mr. Gervis seldom went back from his decisions; he remembered, only too distinctly, that he had been warned that £700 a year, and no more, was what he had to expect; but he also knew that his father's heart was less hard than was commonly supposed, and he felt that the only hope before him lay in the chance of his having touched it. As for paying the upholsterer's bill without assistance, it was out of the question. Things were even worse with him than he had supposed. What little cash

he had in hand would be required by Nina for her journey; he did not know where to seek for money-lenders, nor how to transact business with those gentry, when found; and even were he to have recourse to the extreme measure of sending every stick in his possession to the *Mont-de-Piété*, the sum realized would fall far short of that required.

During these sombre days Nina was gaily making the necessary preparations for her move. She was not in reality quite so unfeeling as her conduct seemed to imply; but to sympathize with her husband in such troubles as were then harassing him was beyond the range of her powers. At the bottom of her heart she felt an amused contempt, not indeed for the man, but for the absurd notions which he had taken up. To her it was no new sensation to be dunned. To her Claud's fears appeared purely chimerical and his scruples Quixotic—the sort of scruples which artists and poets and such people might be expected to feel, but which were wholly out of place in dealings with a hard-headed and selfish world. Howbeit, she kept her thoughts to herself, endeavouring only to cheer up the disconsolate Claud with frequent allusions to the good time coming, when they would go out yachting in

Beachborough Bay, and ride across the downs to Lynchester, and divert themselves as of yore. And in the end she did succeed in so far infecting him with her own good spirits that his anger passed away, and he ceased to blame her for desiring a holiday. Neither of them very well understood the other; but perhaps, of the two, he understood her better, at this time, than she did him.

A morning came at last on which Claud found himself walking sadly away from the Northern station, with Nina's last words, "Mind you come soon," still ringing in his ears. Did she want him to come soon? She had cried a little before saying good-bye; she had even gone so far as to express some rather tardy compunction at leaving him. Yet Claud could not help mentally comparing her departure to the flight of a bird from its cage. He went back to his deserted rooms, where the doors all stood open, where the empty drawers were dragged out, and the floor was still strewn with scraps of packing-paper. The *bonne*, who, with the instinct of her class, had discovered that something was amiss, and suspected a quarrel—for which, in the nature of things, monsieur must be to blame—stared at him with inquisitive and not over-friendly eyes. Perhaps

it was to punish him for his supposed misconduct that she served him with a cold breakfast and filled his *café au lait* with blacks. It was horribly lonely. The bird was flown, her pleasant chirping silenced, and who could tell when he might hear it again? According to all appearance, he would ere long have no cage to put her into.

And now Claud fell into a state of apathy which was a mere waiting for the inevitable crash. He laid aside his new play, finding that his imagination refused to answer to the spur, and although he did some mechanical work for the newspaper with which he was connected, he would have been puzzled to say, an hour afterwards, what it was that he had written about. He has, in fact, since assured me that he recollects next to nothing of this trying part of his life, and does not care to talk about it.

It was the tenth day after that on which he had written to his father, and he had given up all hope of receiving a reply, when a letter addressed in Mr. Gervis's precise little handwriting was delivered to him. He tore it open, and his heart died within him when he found that it contained no cheque. But this was the letter.

"Yacht *Siren*, Plymouth, 7th July.

"My dear Claud,

"Your note has been forwarded to me. I had heard that the Parisians had declined to crown you with laurels, and was sorry for it; though I do not see the slightest reason to doubt the accuracy of their discrimination. Where the deuce did you find a manager to accept your piece? When I next go to Paris I shall be glad if you will introduce me to that person: it is always comforting to meet with a brother fool. That I am a fool is a fact that has long been patent to myself, and I observe signs of its being not altogether a secret to others; but in order to remove any lingering scepticism that may exist upon the point, I have just ordered £800 to be paid in to your bankers.

"I understand that your wife is on a visit to that intellectual father of hers. For this and other reasons, I propose to steer clear of Beachborough for the present.

"I am suffering from an attack of rheumatism which makes me long to flay some one alive; and the sole victim at hand is Evans, upon whom my bitterest sarcasms produce no effect whatsoever. It has occurred to me that, under existing circumstances, you would hardly feel

justified in resenting any amount of refined cruelty; and I therefore have it in my mind to get you on board this ship, and take you for a cruise. Let me have a note to say whether this will suit your arrangements, and whether I shall pick you up at Cherbourg or at Havre.

"Yours,

"V. G."

When Claud had finished reading the above communication, he burst out into a laugh which was not unlike a sob. "Dear old governor!" he exclaimed aloud. "After all, there is no one like him in the world!" Go to him?—of course he would go to him. He had understood Mr. Gervis's tacit appeal. "And he shall bully me to his heart's content!" cried Claud. "Only I know he won't. He'll heap coals of fire on my head. Where's my cheque-book?—where's that ruffian's bill? Oh, wasn't it worth all the infernal torture I have been through to find out what a dear, good fellow that governor of mine is!"

To do Claud justice, Mr. Gervis's letter had made him quite as happy as his £800. He had never been able to forgive himself for the deception which he had practised upon his father; memories of bygone days had risen up

in perpetual accusation against him, and the breach brought about by his marriage between him and the whimsical personage who, all his life long, had been as much a friend and a brother as a father to him, had caused him many and many a secret pang. What did he care if the future were still somewhat obscured by mists? What did it matter to him that, when all outstanding liabilities should have been discharged, there could only remain to his credit a matter of a hundred pounds or so upon which to support life for the last six months of the year? He was free; he had his pen; now that he was alone, he could live upon almost nothing. He walked up and down the room, hardly able to contain himself for satisfaction. He longed to tell somebody of his good fortune. If he had not been too much afraid of the crabbed old servant who ruled his establishment, he would have rung for her, and presented her with the price of a new gown there and then. In the fulness of his joy, he broke out into song—

"Mes amis, la terre est à moi.
J'ai de quoi
Vivre en roi,
Si l'éclat me tente.
Les honneurs me sont dévolus;
J'ai cinquante écus,
J'ai cinquante écus,
J'ai cinquante écus de rente!"

In the midst of this triumphal chant somebody who had knocked twice without obtaining any answer thrust a bullet head and a large, good-humoured countenance through the doorway. The head was presently followed by a body of noble proportions.

"Eh! eh!" ejaculated the intruder, with an air of comical bewilderment; "it seems that adversity raises our spirits here. *Sapristi*, what an original!"

"What, Poinsot! is that you? Look here—just read this letter, will you? No, you can't read it; I'll translate it. There's a father for you! do you think there are many of that kind? Ah, but you don't know how I have treated him, and what he has saved me from."

"*Tiens, tiens, tiens!*" muttered M. Poinsot. "So we possess a benevolent father with an open purse, do we? And I who came here, flattering myself that I was about to act the good Samaritan! Don't look alarmed; I was not going to take any liberties; but from rumours that reached me, I fancied that you might be glad of rather more remunerative employment than that of writing for *Le Petit Voyou;* and the long and the short of it is that I am the bearer of an offer to you from the editor of a paper which is able to pay its contributors at a reasonable rate."

Here M. Poinsot named a journal of established reputation, and explained to Claud what would be the nature of the work required of him and the amount of profit which he might expect to derive from his labours.

Claud dropped into a chair, and covered his face with his hands. "Everything comes at once!" he exclaimed. "Ah, Poinsot, they may say what they like; but life has its good moments!"

Poinsot looked at the young fellow rather oddly. Perhaps he felt a little ashamed of his tardy help. "I should have been to see you before," he said; "but I was for some time away, at Vichy and elsewhere, and when I came back, I had no idea at first that—that——"

"I know—I know. How could you guess that I had reduced myself to beggary? The truth is that I have been careless and extravagant and have got myself into a very pretty mess; but now, thanks to you, I shall be able to keep my head above water, I hope. I have not said much; but I trust you understand how grateful I am."

"What for? For acting as a go-between? That is all that I have done; and my friend the editor has just as much reason to thank me as you have. It is not exactly the mines of

Potosi that I have thrown open to you; but it may serve your purpose until you see your way to something better. And how goes on the new play?—for of course you have begun a new one."

"How could you tell that?" cried Claud in genuine astonishment. "I should not have thought that any one would have credited me with so much presumption. But it is true enough that I have got another drama about half written in my drawer. I wonder—would it bore you very much?—as you are here—would you mind just giving one glance at the outline, and telling me what you think of it?"

The good-natured Poinsot did not refuse. He gave up the rest of the morning to a careful study of Claud's fresh effort; and then the two friends went out together, and, after paying the upholsterer, whose obsequiousness was delightful to witness, proceeded to that handsome newspaper-office with which Claud was soon to become better acquainted. Here it was arranged that the new contributor should enter upon his duties at the end of a fortnight; and the day ended with a dinner at the Café Anglais, provided at the expense of M. Poinsot, who subsequently averred that never, before or since, had he enjoyed so large an amount of

vicarious happiness as upon this auspicious occasion.

It may be hoped that Mr. Gervis also enjoyed his fortnight's cruise among the Channel Islands; for it will surely be admitted that he deserved to do so. When Claud's time was up, he returned straight to Paris, without taking Beachborough on his way. Nina sent him plenty of affectionate little letters, but agreed with him that he was in duty bound to devote the whole of his short holiday to his father. Her own father, she wrote, would not hear of her leaving England before the beginning of the winter.

So Claud went back to Paris alone, to take up his part as one of the resident workers in the city which he had hitherto scarcely known, save as strangers know it. In that new and busy world, where he made many friends, and added considerably to the store of his experience, and where each day brought him some fresh aid towards that study of mankind which he had chosen to adopt as his profession, we may for the present take leave of him.

CHAPTER IV.

IN THE LINCOLNSHIRE WOLDS.

If Mr. Flemyng had been shown the letter in which he was represented as protesting against the notion of his daughter's leaving him, a slightly disdainful smile would probably have illumined the features of that superior being. Nina was, as he had told her, heartily welcome to make use of her old home whenever it might suit her to do so; but to suppose that the society of any member of his family was, or could be, indispensable to Mr. Flemyng would have been to show a lamentable misconception of a nature becoming daily more and more weaned from earthly affections by contemplation of the abstract, and accustomed, in its less lofty moods, to occupy itself rather with the welfare of the community than with those narrower family cares which chiefly interest women. In the compassionate toleration with which he re-

garded women and children at large Mr. Flemyng included his own offspring. He admitted a certain degree of responsibility for them; he paid—not without casual rufflings of the philosophic calm—for their sustenance, their clothing, and their education; but, like his neighbour Mr. Gervis, he was a disbeliever in natural affection, and in fact looked upon the circumstance of his having children at all as merely one of those retributions which inexorable Nature inflicts upon the heedlessness of youth.

It may be assumed, therefore, without fear of doing Nina an injustice, that her father's alleged unwillingness to part with her was but a euphemism for her own reluctance to spend the hot months of August and September in Paris, and that she did not mean to imply that she would remain during the whole of that time stationary at the Moated House. As a matter of fact, she was scarcely there at all after the first few weeks. For a time the freedom, the space, the comfort of having plenty of servants at command, the cheerful racket of a large household, and the shady repose of summer lawns had sufficiently refreshed her soul. Even Jacky and Tommy, whose reverence for their sister was in no way deepened by her new dig-

nity as a married woman, had had their charms; and it had been amusing to receive the visits of the neighbours, to submit her Parisian dresses to their envious gaze, to laugh in her sleeve at their oddities, and to baffle their inquisitive queries about her husband. But delights of this kind soon pall upon an energetic disposition; and before the end of July Mrs. Claud Gervis had come to the conclusion that it was high time to let her friends know that she was in England.

Of these the name was legion; for Nina Flemyng had always been one of those girls whom everybody likes: especially had she been dear to ladies with country-houses to fill. Cheerful, pretty, well-dressed, fond of fun and ready for anything that might be going, yet in no way what could be called a fast young woman, her worth had been fully appreciated by those *châtelaines*. Some of them, who had not only big houses but unmarried eldest sons also to look after, had, it is true, fought a little shy of her at times; but now that she was both married and unencumbered with the society of her husband, the list of her qualifications as a desirable guest seemed to be complete; and in a brief space of time she had more invitations than she could accept.

So, while Claud was scribbling away for dear life on the other side of the Channel, his wife was flitting from one English county to another, charming all whom she met and leaving scores of smitten hearts in her wake. She wrote to Paris with commendable regularity, sometimes giving humorous descriptions of the persons whose salt she was eating, sometimes merely acknowledging the receipt of letters or papers, but very generally asking for remittances. Some people raised their eyebrows when they heard that she was a bride of less than a year's standing, and wondered that she should be already roaming about the world unprotected; but the majority troubled neither themselves nor her with speculations about matters which did not concern them. There was no scarcity of wives without their husbands and husbands without their wives in the various places to which her wanderings led her.

Now it came to pass that, in the last days of September, Mrs. Gervis reached a certain house which stands upon the edge of the Lincolnshire wolds, and there fell in with an old friend and neighbour, whom, as it had chanced, she had not encountered since her return to her native land. She arrived late in the afternoon, and was sitting in the drawing-room before

dinner, taking stock of the men whom partridge-shooting had attracted to those parts, as they strolled in, one by one, when suddenly a well-known dapper little figure showed itself amid a cluster of strange ones. The new-comer caught sight of her at the same moment, and straightway advanced towards her, joy depicted upon his countenance.

"Fancy meeting you here!" he exclaimed. "The very person of all others whom I wanted to see! This *is* a bit of luck."

"How flattering!" said Nina, holding out her hand to him. "I am sure I am delighted to see you; but had you any very particular reason for wishing to see me, if one may ask?"

"Oh, I heard you were in England—hoped we should come across one another—such a long time since we've met," Freddy answered, a little confused; for he had been upon the point of giving a perfectly honest reply, and had only been checked by a timely recollection that few ladies like to be told that they are welcome chiefly for the sake of any information which they may be in a position to impart as to the welfare of another of their sex.

"Not such a very long time, is it?" asked Nina innocently. "When was it that you were in Paris? Scarcely more than three months

ago, I think. But perhaps you have forgotten that we met there."

"No fear! I remember perfectly well that I called upon you, and, by the same token, that you wouldn't have anything to say to me."

"I was brought up to speak when I was spoken to," answered Nina demurely. "You didn't come to the Rue d'Amsterdam to see me, you know, and it wasn't for me to interrupt your conversation. Let me see: it was the Grand Prix that brought you over to Paris, wasn't it? How pretty that Longchamps course is!—and all the woods round it too. I don't know a pleasanter place to spend a quiet day in than the Bois."

Freddy looked at her, half amused, half alarmed. Evidently the murder was to some extent out; but did Nina know the whole truth, or was she fishing? He was almost inclined to rely upon her good nature and their long-standing friendship, and make a clean breast of it. For he was dying for news of Geneviève, and he was sufficiently versed in the ways of women to be aware that the surest method of enlisting their sympathy is to flatter their vanity by intrusting them with a secret. But before he had time to commit himself, he was led away to the other end of the room to be in-

troduced to the lady whom he was to take in to dinner; and it was not until much later in the evening that he found another opportunity of approaching Mrs. Gervis.

She was then seated, a little apart from the rest of the company, upon one of those low, deep sofas which modern upholstery has adapted, with luxurious improvements, from a shape in use among our forefathers, and which is designed to accommodate not more than two persons. Some one who had been talking to her had just risen, and Freddy hastened to secure the vacant place before anybody else could make for it.

"Heard anything of the Princess lately?" he asked, with a fine assumption of carelessness, as he sank down upon the cushions.

"I had a letter from her a few days ago," answered Nina. "She is in the Pyrenees, enjoying herself immensely, she says."

"All well, I hope?"

"I presume she is quite well. She didn't mention her health."

"And—er—the rest of the party? Are they all right?"

"Well, I believe M. Hirsch is not any better. But there is not much chance of his ever being any better, I am afraid."

"I suppose not. Poor beggar! Hum!"

After this there was a pause, during which Mrs. Gervis fanned herself placidly, and contemplated her neighbour with a faintly ironical smile.

"Hang it all, Nina!" burst out Freddy at last, "we've been friends all our lives, and the deuce is in it if I mayn't speak plainly to you. You know what I want well enough. Tell me all about her. I haven't so much as heard her name mentioned for months; and that beggar Claud is the worst correspondent that ever stepped."

Nina did not reply at once. She continued to survey her questioner with the same faint smile, as though she found him an entertaining, and at the same time rather singular study.

"What made you fall in love with her, Freddy?" she asked presently.

Freddy laughed, "How should I know? What made you fall in love with Claud?"

"Ah!"

With this somewhat ambiguous response Nina relapsed once more into silence. But after a minute or two she roused herself, as if with an effort, and said brusquely—

"Well—what am I to tell you about her? I

don't correspond with her, you know. I believe she is quite well, if it is any satisfaction to you to hear that; and I suppose she is playing the violin as usual; and she has got an admirer—a M. d'Arblay, whom the Princess is moving heaven and earth to get her to marry. However, you needn't let the thought of that spoil your night's rest; there is no occasion for jealousy. From what I saw of M. d'Arblay, I should say he was exactly the husband for her—a very good fellow, rather slow, but a great musician and a man who takes a serious view of life—a male counterpart of herself, in short. And therefore, of course, she abhors him, and adores you, who haven't a thought or a taste in common with her, It's a queer world we live in."

"It's good enough for me," observed Freddy contentedly. "I'm sure I've had more luck in it than I deserve."

"Oh, if every one had his deserts!—But maybe, after all, you are less lucky than you fancy yourself. Who knows good luck from bad? 'The proof of the pudding is in the eating.' We are all of us like so many children diving into a bran-tub. We clutch hold of the biggest thing we can find; and it is not until we have retired into a corner to examine our

treasure that we discover whether it is the grand prize that we have been dreaming about for weeks, or only half a brick-bat, neatly wrapped up in silver paper. Life is always planning these pleasant little surprises for us. Life, my dear Freddy, taking it all in all, is a gigantic mistake. The best way of treating it is to think about it as little as possible, and to dance and sing while one can. They are dancing in the next room now. Shall we go and take a turn? You and I used to waltz together often enough once upon a time."

Dancing was much more in Freddy's line than moralizing. He led his partner to the hastily cleared room where some ten couples were already revolving, and there soon convinced himself that she had lost none of the skill which he had been used to admire in her in days of yore.

"Do I dance decently?" she asked, pausing, a little out of breath, at the end of their second waltz.

"You know you do," answered Freddy, laughing, "or you wouldn't put such a conceited question. Your dancing is as good as it can be."

"As good as Geneviève's?"

"I am not going to draw odious comparisons,"

replied the judicious Freddy. "You are both of you perfection."

"Don't be imbecile. I want to hear the truth: do I dance better than she does?"

"Well, if you insist upon being told," said Freddy, a little reluctantly, "I suppose you do. In fact, I'm sure you do; but——"

"But she plays the fiddle, *n'est-ce pas?* It is like Ollendorf's exercises—'Has he a good heart?'—'No; but he has the Irishman's wooden leg.' I am not daring to put myself upon a level with her on any point, except one; and you need not grudge me that. Let me have the satisfaction of thinking that I am superior to incarnate perfection in one small particular."

Freddy did not altogether relish this tone as applied to his future wife. With happy tact, he led the conversation into another channel by asking Nina how long her period of grass-widowhood was going to last. But she interrupted him impatiently.

"For the love of Heaven, don't use that disgustingly vulgar expression, and don't talk about it at all! If you knew how many times that same inquiry has been put to me, in rather more refined terms, during the last six weeks! Let it be supposed, for the time being, that I

haven't got a husband, or that he is somewhere in the room. Unless you want to get rid of me, you will avoid the subject."

She recurred to it, however, of her own accord, a little later, when the dancing was over, and she and Freddy had returned to their corner in the drawing-room.

"So here we are, partners in misfortune, two forlorn doves without our respective mates," she said; "and we can mingle our tears. So the world goes round. It seems odd, doesn't it?"

She had dropped into a very graceful and pensive attitude, her cheek resting on her hand and supported by the most perfectly modelled arm in the world. There had been a time when Freddy had admired that hand and arm prodigiously—when, in point of fact, he had been within an ace of soliciting the former for his own. But circumstances had ordained otherwise. Lady Croft had been over-anxious; Nina herself had thought fit to snub him at the critical moment; and so he had drawn back, and that fine project had melted into air, like many another that had preceded it. Was it some memory of those half-forgotten days, Freddy wondered, that caused Nina to discover oddity in the present situation? He judged it,

in any case, best to ignore the allusion, and to answer only the first of her remarks.

"I dare say we shall neither of us shed tears," he said; "though I can tell you I sometimes feel very much like it. This sort of thing is precious hard lines on a fellow, mind you. You're different; I don't see that you have much to growl about. You can write to Claud, and hear from him, every day of your life, and I suppose you can go to him whenever you feel inclined?"

"Perhaps he doesn't want me to go to him," she returned in a low voice, looking down at the tips of two tiny black satin shoes, which were quite new—being, indeed, one of half a dozen pairs which Claud had just sent her from Paris at her request. Then she looked up suddenly, so that her eyes encountered Freddy's, and added, with a sort of forced gaiety, "You forget that I am married to an author, and that with husbands of that persuasion, Art (with a big A) begins the alphabet, and wife (with a small w) comes very near the end of it."

Freddy looked at her, and was moved with compassion. "Poor little soul!" he thought, "I was sure there was a screw loose somewhere. Fancy preferring pens and ink to her!—what an infernal shame! By George, what a duffer Claud is!"

He felt quite a glow of virtuous indignation against his absent friend. "Of course he wants you," he said aloud.

"You think so? Well then, perhaps I don't want——" She broke off. "The truth of the matter is," she confessed, with a frank laugh, "that if I were to go back to Paris now, I should be a terrible burden upon him. We married in haste, as you know; and if we have not repented of the marriage itself at our leisure, we have at all events had some reason to repent of the haste. We are simply eaten up with poverty; and the longer I stay away the more we can economize in bread and butter —don't you see?" Then, as Freddy only looked concerned and answered nothing, she resumed: "I have come to the conclusion that Mr. Gervis was quite right, and that there should be no hurry about matrimony. I am sure you ought to be much obliged to him for giving you plenty of time to look before you leap. In nine cases out of ten, when it comes to be a question of marriage, the wisest plan is to think three times, and then not to do it."

She could hardly have stated in plainer language that she looked upon her own marriage as a matter for regret; and in truth there were

moments in which she did so regard it. "As for you, you are not married yet," she said.

"I'm going to be, though," returned Freddy stoutly.

"You have thought that once or twice before, haven't you?"

She raised those beautiful grey eyes of hers to her neighbour's face with a look which sent a vague thrill and sensation of uneasiness through him. How handsome she was!—how thoroughbred!—how perfectly finished at all points! And how well that little air of mingled irony and melancholy became her! Freddy was more than ever convinced that Claud was a duffer.

Now, the perspicuous reader will doubtless have seen from the outset of this colloquy that Mrs. Gervis, despite her matronly dignity, had maintained, or reverted to, her old habits, and that, for reasons best known to herself, she was now pleased to exercise her fascinations upon one who had successfully resisted them in former times. What those reasons were I do not pretend to guess. Nina flirted, as a duckling swims, and it was by no means a necessary deduction from her doing so that she had any aim, definite or indefinite, before her. In the present instance, it is possible that she may have

been to some extent influenced by the desire to score a point against Geneviève, whose cold reception of her advances she had never quite pardoned. Be that as it may, it is certain that Freddy himself had no suspicion of what she was driving at. He had never been in love with Nina Flemyng, and was not likely to become so now. When that period of courtship, which had so nearly culminated in an engagement, had come to an end, he had gone away for a few months, and on his return had met her as the old playmate and friend that she had always been to him; and it was in that light, and no other, that he regarded her now. Moreover, he was a loyal little fellow, and, setting aside his love for Geneviève, would have thought it a disgraceful thing to make love to his friend's wife.

Nevertheless he returned Nina's gaze with one of those looks which may mean a great deal or nothing at all. And for my part, I am free to confess that I do not at all blame him in this matter. I have no hesitation in saying that I myself, for all my five and forty years, should have acted likewise under similar circumstances. I don't see what else he could have done. I don't see what else an archbishop could have done, even had Mrs. Archbishop

been watching him from the opposite side of the room. *Œillades* of this description are like a Freemason's grip; you are bound to return them; and to ignore them would be almost as discourteous as to cut a lady in the street. Their innocence or the reverse depends solely upon the significance lent to them by the persons concerned; and the same may be said of a shake of the hand or a movement of the head.

This exchange of glances took place, then, in accordance with rule and precedent, and was followed by nothing more romantic than a half-suppressed yawn on the part of the lady.

"How sleepy this air makes one!" she said. "What does one do with oneself here? You are out shooting all day long, I suppose?"

"I was to-day," answered Freddy.

"And all the other men too, of course. If there is a fatiguing thing, it's having to do the amiable to a lot of ill-tempered women; and almost all women are ill-tempered until after luncheon. I wonder whether they have got anything one could ride in the stables?"

"Oh, bless you, yes!" said the good-natured Freddy. "I'll find a mount for you to-morrow, and we'll go out and have a gallop. I'll let the shooting slide for once," he added generously.

"Oh, will you?" she exclaimed, brightening. "Now, that would be a really kind act. Do you remember our gallops on the Lynchester race-course ever so long ago? What fun we used to have! Does Geneviève ride? 'No; but she plays the fiddle.' There—don't be cross; I didn't mean to say anything disagreeable."

"But she *does* ride," cried Freddy, really indignant.

"Does she? So much the better then. I shan't ask whether she rides better than I do. I know I can follow you wherever you choose to go; and that is enough for all practical purposes; isn't it? I must not expect to surpass perfection in more than one accomplishment."

"Hang it! Nina," broke out Freddy, in a tone of great annoyance, "I believe you're jealous of her."

He did not intend his charge to bear anything but a general application; but she chose to interpret it otherwise. She was silent for a moment; and then—"Perhaps," she answered gravely. And this time she accompanied the word with a look which cannot be said to have been as innocent as her former one.

Was it a proof of very unwarrantable conceit

in Freddy that he went off to the smoking-room presently in a reflective mood, and that, thinking over the above conversation, it should have occurred to him that this neglected wife might possibly be repenting of her choice, and regretting that she had not made better use of a certain opportunity of establishing herself in a more congenial home? The upshot of his self-communings was that he was very sorry for Nina, and that he determined to be as kind as he could to her during the few days that they were likely to be together. *O sancta simplicitas!* At that very moment, if he had but known it, Mrs. Gervis and his hostess were sitting in their dressing-gowns before a blazing fire, disposing of him in a few perfectly candid sentences.

"He is a dear little fellow, the former was saying. "Dreadfully dull, you know—a little of him goes a long way—but quite the kindest-hearted creature that ever breathed. He and I have been sworn allies ever since the days when we used to make mud pies together as children. He is very anxious to take me out riding to-morrow; and I said I would go, if you did not object, and if you could spare me a horse. Where *did* you get that lovely old lace?"

CHAPTER V.

AMONG THE SAND-HILLS.

The scenes, episodes, conversations, and so forth which make up this chronicle have, it is hardly necessary to say, come to the knowledge of the writer, not in their present consecutive shape, but at divers times and from sundry sources—a bit here and a bit there, after the fashion of those puzzle-pictures with which good children are allowed to amuse themselves on Sunday afternoons, and whose component parts require a little trouble and ingenuity to piece together, while some of them, as time goes on, are apt to be missing altogether.

In the forming of the picture now before you many gaps have had to be filled up by the artist to the best of his poor abilities. He has found himself compelled to put in figures which may very likely be a little out of drawing; he has shown his lamentable ignorance of per-

spective perhaps; perhaps he has thrown light upon places which a more skilful craftsman would have left in shade, and *vice versâ*. I plead guilty in advance to clumsy workmanship and to a hundred blunders which have doubtless been apparent to the reader, begging him only to believe that upon the accuracy of the main incidents submitted to him he may implicitly rely; while as for details, it is notorious that a little license of fancy in that direction has ever been conceded to all historians, great and small. The invaluable assistance afforded to me by Miss Potts has of necessity been available for a portion only of the narrative in hand; Claud, who has a good memory and, when in the vein, considerable descriptive powers, has been unable to enlighten me as to certain particulars of which it is important that the reader should be informed; and it is obvious that some dialogues already recorded were neither heard by me nor reported *verbatim* by those who took part in them. Thus, in default of omniscience, I have ventured to fall back, every now and then, upon imagination, upon antecedent probability, and upon my knowledge of the persons with whom I am concerned. If the words which I have imputed to them are not precisely those that they uttered, it is

demonstrable that they must have made use of others to much the same effect; and although I scorn to disguise the fact that I have never penetrated beyond the outer walls of that Lincolnshire mansion where we left two of our friends at the end of the last chapter, yet, from what has reached me from various quarters, I could, if it were necessary, draw a tolerably correct ground-plan of the building; while of the incidents that occurred there during the autumn days to which the sequence of events has now brought us, I have heard enough to feel sure that imagination may be trusted to fill up the blanks with a fair approach to exactitude.

Imagination, then—and no great stretch of it—will enable us to see Mrs. Gervis as she rides across the bare country with Freddy Croft, to catch echoes of what passes between them, and to watch the melancholy, though by no means uncommon, spectacle of an honest man being made a fool of by a pretty woman. Imagination will picture without difficulty the ease with which Nina, having made up her mind to flirt with her old admirer, persuaded that innocent to devote himself exclusively to her, and the opportunities which country-house life afforded for the carrying out of her purpose, and the mingled pity and amusement of

those who looked on at this time-honoured comedy. During the whole of the first day Freddy, being still under the impression that he was the object of an ill-starred attachment, bore himself towards his companion with a gentleness and subdued commiseration which, if she understood its cause, must have been infinitely diverting to her; but when he found that Nina was in the highest of spirits, and that she indulged in no more sighs or sentimental innuendoes, this view of the case faded out of his mind, and he yielded, half-unconsciously, to those bewitching female influences which had kept him more or less in hot water from his boyhood up. The notion that he was being guilty of anything like treachery to Geneviève did not suggest itself to him. Geneviève, in his thoughts, was raised upon a pinnacle far above the heads of womankind at large; love such as he felt for her could have nothing whatever to say to the sort of pastime with which he and Mrs. Gervis, and perhaps three or four other couples at the same time and in the same house, were amusing themselves; and it would be in some sort an insult to her to suppose that his conduct with regard to these inferior beings could cause her any uneasiness, or to place her upon the same

footing with ladies who, though charming in her way, were essentially of the earth, earthy. Such, at least, might have been the answer he would have made to conscience, if conscience had accused him; but it is more probable that he neither analyzed his sensations nor took himself to task for them; but simply enjoyed the passing hour and what it brought, as his easy nature led him to do.

Nina, for her part, enjoyed her stay in Lincolnshire so much that she readily consented to prolong it. The life was of a kind that suited her better than any other. The party assembled in the house was composed entirely of young people, with a proponderance of young men; unquestioned liberty was accorded to all; what with riding, driving, and walking to meet the sportsmen on their return, the daylight hours were amply provided for; the evenings were given up to dancing and theatricals, and she had secured, in the person of the foolish Freddy, what she had always held to be essential to complete comfort in such situations, a cavalier set apart for her especial service.

This couple became so inseparable that if one of the company happened to ask, "Has anybody seen Croft?" he was sure to be met

with a counter-query of "Where's Mrs. Gervis?" and the appearance of one of them without the other invariably gave rise to a fire of pleasantries which were not in the least resented by the objects of them. There surely could have been no great harm in so open and undisguised a flirtation; but the worst of playing with edged tools is that it needs but the slightest jog of the elbow to make the player inflict a nasty wound upon himself or the person nearest to him; and if Freddy, upon whom experience has always been thrown away, overlooked this danger, it cannot be pretended that Nina was equally unconscious of it.

The fact was that something more than inborn craving for admiration was at the bottom of Mrs. Gervis's reckless behaviour. She had not been insincere when she had given Freddy to understand that her husband's evident indifference made her unhappy. She knew that the happiness which for so short a time had seemed to be within her grasp had slipped away from her for ever; and though, with that curious candour and self-knowledge of hers, she had always foretold that it would do so, she had hardly anticipated so speedy a justification of her prediction, nor was she at all inclined to admit that she alone was to blame for its

fulfilment. She had forgotten her desertion of Claud in the hour of his tribulation; she had forgotten that it was by her will and suggestion, not his, that she was absent from him still; but what she could neither forget nor forgive was that he had never, by word or hint, expressed a wish for her return, that he was to all appearance perfectly content to live without her, and lastly—worst offence of all—that he could by no means be brought to exhibit any shadow of the jealousy which husbands surely ought to feel when their wives are gallivanting about the country in the company of other men. Could this be the same Claud who, only twelve months ago, had pulled a long face when, to tease him, she had given him a list of her former philanderings? She purposely sent him a glowing description of a certain renowned lady-killer whom she met in the west of England; and in his reply he never mentioned this dangerous individual at all. From Lincolnshire she wrote to him some account of her newly formed alliance with Freddy Croft; and in due course came a hastily written answer, in which Claud said that he was overwhelmed with work and had little time for letter-writing: that he was glad to hear that she was enjoying herself, and that she had foregathered with Freddy.

"You two always got on well together," he observed, "and I should think that, between you, you are keeping the Lincolnshire people alive."

When Nina read these words, she crumpled up the paper and threw it away from her with a sudden gesture of exasperation, "Have it your own way then!" she cried; and if at that moment Freddy had proposed an elopement to her, I am quite inclined to believe that he would have obtained her consent.

Freddy was far indeed from harbouring any such shocking intentions. Mrs. Gervis had succeeded in making his visit very pleasant to him; but if she imagined that she could induce him to postpone his departure by a single day, she entirely mistook her man. On the 28th our young gentleman was due at Newmarket; and from Newmarket there was but one woman in the world who could keep him. But as the date of the first October meeting drew near, he was kind enough to say that he wished it could be deferred for another week. "I shall be awfully sorry to leave this," he declared; "we've had such a jolly time of it, and now there's an end of it all." And he pumped up a prodigious sigh.

Nina looked at him and laughed. "Don't

try to put on a melancholy face," she said. "Keep that for next week, when you find you have backed the wrong horse. There is no occasion to look dismal because we are about to part. We shall meet again before long, unless something happens to one of us; and if we were to live on like this much longer, the chances are that we should become utterly sick of each other. As it is, we shall be able, I hope, to say farewell with a proper amount of regret—which is something to be thankful for. To-morrow will be your last day, won't it? What do you mean to do?"

"Whatever you tell me," answered Freddy, gallantly.

Nina was standing in the bay window of the drawing-room, which overlooked a foreground of undulating slopes, beyond which a vast and unbroken plain stretched away to meet the sky. A sort of silvery haze on the horizon gave an indefinite idea of the point at which those low-lying lands lost themselves in the German Ocean.

"I was thinking," she said, "that I should rather like to have a last ride—a really long one. Do you think it would be at all possible to get as far as the sea? It looks as if one might ride and ride, and never find oneself any

nearer to it—as if it was somewhere beyond the edge of the world."

"Oh dear, no!" answered the matter-of-fact Freddy. "About fourteen miles as the crow flies, I should say; and one ought to be able to make pretty straight for it. It looks farther because the weather's rather thick. I don't see a bit why we shouldn't go there, and have a gallop on the sands too. The only thing is, it would be better to make an early start, so as to let the horses have a rest."

"I wonder whether we could set off directly after breakfast, and take some sandwiches with us."

"Of course we could. That would be first-rate."

"Only then perhaps some of the others would want to come with us."

"I'll tell them they ain't wanted," said Freddy cheerfully; and there is not the least doubt but that he would have carried out his intention.

But Nina said she thought it would be hardly necessary to be so explicit. "I dare say you will be able to make them understand," she added, with a laugh.

Freddy, it must be assumed, was equal to the emergency; for the next morning saw our two

friends setting forth upon their expedition unaccompanied, their host shouting a few last directions to them from the steps.

"Stick to the Queen's highway, Croft; there's grass on both sides of the road everywhere. If you try cutting across country, you may get to some fences that will puzzle you. You'll find stabling at Mablethorpe, and I believe there's an inn, where Mrs. Gervis will be able to get a cup of tea, or something, if she wants it. By-bye!"

Their way led them down the slope of the hills, through woods where the leaves were already beginning to flutter down with every gust of wind, past fields in which the harvesters were still at work, and so out at last upon the great plain. It was through a curious, un-English-looking landscape of flats and fens that they rode—a landscape mapped out into rectilinear fields and pasture-lands, dotted at rare intervals with solitary trees, and cut by the long white line of the high-road, and the black one of the railway, which converged towards the horizon, where the sea was no longer visible. At their backs, half hidden in pearly mists, rose the swelling wolds, whence they had come; but before them, and to their right hand and their left, the endless level spread itself, broken only

by here and there a farm-house or a grey church-tower, seen far and wide. When low black clouds hang over it, and the heavy winter rains are streaming up from the southward, as from an inexhaustible reservoir, this country wears an aspect more wofully dismal than any one who has not seen it under such circumstances can well form an idea of; but under clear skies it has a charm of its own—the charm of space, the charm of the desert, or of the sea, when no land is in sight. Perhaps, though, it is at its best on such a still, misty morning as that on which our two equestrians made its acquaintance. Bright sunshine is a little out of keeping with its peculiar character; but grey weather, with distant shafts of lights, like Jacob's ladders, breaking through the clouds, and the hush of the dying summer brooding over all things, seems to suit its sobriety, and to lend it a kind of melancholy peace which, if it be not beauty, is not far removed from it. As in the land of the lotos-eaters it is always afternoon, so in these parts, one fancies, it should be always autumn.

Freddy and Nina, neither of whom was in the mood for studying scenery, were probably not conscious of this soothing influence; but the landscape pleased them—perhaps because

they were in a good humour—and they agreed that, in respect of natural attractiveness, Lincolnshire had been much maligned. Both of them country-bred, they had a delight in rural surroundings, of which dwellers in cities are ignorant, and found a dozen trifles to remark upon where the uninitiated would have detected nothing. While they cantered along the way-side grass, Freddy scanned the wheat and barley with a farmer's eye, appraising their value and comparing them with his own, which had been carried some weeks before. Urged by promptings that we know of, he had latterly been devoting much attention to the duties of a landed proprietor, and was not a little proud of his newly acquired lore.

But as they went on their way, there was less and less to be said in favour of the crops; and soon these ceased altogether, and were replaced by poor, sandy grazing-lands and dykes, among which some half-starved horses were wandering and cropping the coarse herbage. And then—suddenly, as it seemed, though in reality the barriers had been visible miles away—a long range of low sand-hills blocked the travellers' path, and they knew that they had reached the sea. Here the road turned off abruptly at right angles; but Freddy spurred his horse,

and breasted the natural earthwork, Nina following him. It was, as Freddy said, "a bit of a breather" for their beasts; for the ascent, though short, was sharp, and in that loose, heavy sand the horses floundered up to their hocks; but presently they were upon the summit, and, creeping gingerly down upon the other side, found themselves on such an expanse of firm sea-sand as is not to be met with everywhere. Far away were the white breakers of the ebbing tide; gulls were circling and swooping over the waves; a fleet of Grimsby fishing-smacks was in the offing; a fresh, salt-smelling wind blew steadily inland. Here were life and movement enough—a strange contrast to the still world that lay so near.

"This is glorious!" exclaimed Nina, drawing in her breath. "How I love the sea! And oh, what a place for a gallop! Freddy, I will race you to that point, and take your two to one."

But Freddy looked doubtful. "If I was riding one of my own horses, I'd lay it you like a shot," he said; "but we've come a goodish distance; and don't you think—eh?——"

"That it isn't quite the thing to distress one's neighbour's cattle? Perhaps not. Well, let us trot soberly off to the stables, wherever

they are. What a bore it is that pleasant things are always wrong! I suppose it's the effect of the sea air; but I have a desperate inclination to do something outrageous. Do you ever feel like that?"

"Very often," answered Freddy. "And then, as a general thing, I do it."

"Just so; but I can't. We women are not allowed free play, as you are—more's the pity! A woman who respects herself must wear stays."

"If you come to that, a man has got to shave himself every morning. I don't see why you should have the grumbling all to yourself."

But Nina went on, without noticing this interpolation. "I will say for myself that I have always recognized the bonds that we are born with, and submitted to them. No one can have stronger impulses than I have sometimes to snap my fingers in the face of society; yet I defy my worst enemy to mention more than one instance in my life of my having given people an excuse to gossip about me. And even that one, if I had thought about it a little longer—— But what is done is done. I wonder whether Geneviève ever feels a craving to do something outrageous?"

"I don't know, I'm sure."

"Of course she never does. She takes far too lofty a view of life and its duties to be guilty of such levity. I don't think she has ever forgiven me, or will forgive me, for having been married without a wreath of orange-blossoms. Her own wedding, I suppose, will be performed in the presence of a large assemblage, with solemn rites and full orchestral accompaniment, won't it?"

"Do you know," said Freddy, "I think, if you don't mind, I'd rather not discuss her."

Coming from Freddy, whose good humour was generally proof against any amount of raillery, this was a tolerably severe snub; but Nina did not resent it. She only laughed, and touched her horse with the whip.

"Very well, then," said she, "she shan't be discussed. We'll go and discuss some mutton-chops instead, if the natives can produce mutton-chops. I don't know how you feel, but I am ravenous."

By this time they had reached Mablethorpe, a diminutive watering-place which has sprung up among those rolling sand-hills, and enjoys some annual three months of semi-existence as against nine of profound torpor. The lodging-houses were deserted now, and the one-storeyed hotel displayed a row of closed shut-

ters, behind which presumably the inhabitants were hybernating. Refreshment for man and beast proved, however, to be attainable; and Mrs. Gervis won the heart of the heavy-footed Lincolnshire rustic who waited upon the strangers by demanding to see her children, and presenting them with sixpence apiece to buy lollypops. For some reason or other, Nina was in wild spirits. She played hide-and-seek with the dirty little children; when they were gone, she gave a facetious imitation of their mother's gait and dialect; she chattered incessantly, and cracked jokes which, if they were not very novel, were not the less appreciated; insomuch that for the space of more than an hour, Freddy's jolly laughter hardly ceased to resound through the empty house. His own spirits were never at a very low ebb, and needed but the smallest provocation to become ungovernable. Give him a congenial companion, and Freddy was not the man to hesitate at burning the house down for the fun of seeing it blaze.

Nevertheless, before the afternoon was over, memories of his Latin grammar brought back the old adage of *væ tibi ridenti* to his mind. For Mrs. Gervis, like others of her sex, was subject to unaccountable fluctuations of mood;

and when she and her escort started to walk down to the shore before setting out on their homeward journey, she became on a sudden absent and depressed, and returned no answer to remarks addressed to her. She may have been chilled by the prospect out of doors, which had changed somewhat for the worse. The light was beginning to fail; and as the sun sank in a yellow sky, barred with horizontal black clouds, the wind backed into the north-west, and threatened to rise, blowing in gusts, which rushed out towards the sea, driving pillars of sand before them. The fishing-smacks had made the Humber, and vanished; the tide was at its lowest; and the dark strip of sea, with its fringe of white breakers beyond two miles of wet sand, was out of hearing and almost out of sight. The whole scene was inexpressibly mournful. All sign of life had left it; and the silence of it was broken only when the wind, sweeping through the telegraph wires which connected the village with the railway-station, carried a low, wailing sound through the air, like an echo of far-away Æolian harps.

"I am tired," said Nina abruptly; "let us sit down."

She seated herself, as she spoke, upon the

summit of the ridge of sandy dunes, with her back to the darkening land, which fell away till it seemed to reach a far lower level than that of the sea which in old times washed over it; and clasping her hands round her knees, gazed abstractedly towards the horizon. Freddy, stretched out at her feet, propped his chin on his hand, and contemplated her—a graceful, shapely figure, in her well-fitting habit, standing out against that pale sky.

"Well," she said at length, "why don't you speak? What are you thinking about?"

"I wasn't thinking about anything," was Freddy's perfectly truthful reply. "I was looking at you."

"Were you? What did you see, I wonder? Did it ever happen to you to fancy that you could see yourself, as if you were looking at another person?"

"I don't know that it ever did," answered Freddy.

"It happens to me sometimes; and when it does, I am filled with an immense pity for myself."

This sensation also was apparently beyond the limits of Freddy's experience; for he stared, and made no rejoinder.

"I see myself sitting before me," Nina con-

tinued, "and I think, 'Poor girl! there isn't much harm in her; but there never can be much good; and how can she help it?' Why should we be blamed and punished for being what we were created? You know the fable of the Ant and the Grasshopper. I remember how, even as a child, I used to be shocked at the horrible injustice of it. The poor little grasshopper had chirped and made the best of things while the summer lasted: it wasn't her fault that she had been born a grasshopper, and didn't know how to lay up stores for the winter, any more than it was to the credit of the ant that she had been born an ant, and followed the ways of ants."

"But we are all born human beings," observed Freddy, who did not quite perceive the drift of his companion's remarks.

"The ant and the grasshopper were both born insects. Do you suppose there are not as many kinds of human beings as there are of insects in the world? You and I belong to the grasshopper tribe: we can chirp; but I don't know that we can do much else. Oh, Freddy, don't let us try to be anything but what we are! We may deceive ourselves for a time; but Nature is stronger than we, and the awakening has to come. People like Claud

and Geneviève are altogether above our heads ; they belong to a different species, and we can't mate with them. You won't let me warn you ; it makes you angry if I venture so much as to mention her name ; but I shouldn't mind that, if I could save you from the future. Can't you see that what has happened to me must inevitably happen to you too ?—that sooner or later she will find you wanting ?—that she will look down upon you ?—that it will be as impossible for you to be happy with her as—as it is for me to be happy with Claud ?"

Her voice broke ; there were tears in her eyes ; she was nervously plucking tufts of the coarse bent that covered the sand-hills, and casting them this way and that upon the wind. I have not the slightest doubt but that, at the moment, she meant every word that she said, and had worked herself up into the belief that she was entirely disinterested.

Freddy, whose tender-heartedness we are acquainted with, was much distressed, and knew not how to comfort her. "I'm awfully sorry," he murmured, taking the hand which she had allowed to drop by her side.

She did not withdraw it. She turned her grey eyes, swimming in tears, upon his face, and—"Don't be sorry for me," she said ;

"my fate is decided. Think of yourself. Ask yourself, before it is too late, whether you have not made a mistake. If you had, it wouldn't be quite the first, would it? Sometimes, during the last week, I have thought that you—that I —that we *both* made a mistake once."

And then she drew her hand away, and began to cry softly. And then—I am sorry to be obliged to record that then Freddy put his arm round her slim waist, and kissed her.

It cannot be denied that this was worthy of all blame. It is, I am aware, no excuse for the offender that the experiences of a short, but eventful, life had led him to attach little importance to such salutes, nor that in the present instance he had been actuated by motives of compassion rather than by love, nor that repentance followed close upon the heels of guilt. But in order to soften in some degree the hard heart of the reader (who, in a like case, would of course rather die than thus misconduct himself), I may perhaps be permitted so far to anticipate the sequel as to say that Freddy's momentary lapse met with as full and severe a punishment as the most rigid lover of justice could have desired.

CHAPTER VI.

EXCELLENT ADVICE.

Kisses, unfortunately, are among the gifts which may be returned, but cannot by any possibility be retracted; and as they are in many cases made to replace language, and are supposed to express an infinite variety of sentiments which there is a difficulty about putting into words, there is clearly some risk that the intention of them may occasionally be misconstrued by their recipient. These considerations should keep all wise and prudent men from kissing their neighbours' wives—at least, until they have made sure that their salute will be accepted in the same spirit as given. But young men are seldom wise and never prudent. Freddy Croft, in kissing Mrs. Gervis, had yielded to a not unnatural impulse roused by the sight of a pretty woman in tears. In much the same manner, if he had seen a small

child tumble down in the street and break its toy, his good nature would probably have prompted him to pick up the unfortunate, pat her on the head, and say, "There, don't cry, and I'll get you another dolly." *Mutatis mutandis*, that, or very little more than that, had been the meaning of his kiss; but Mrs. Gervis saw fit to put quite another interpretation upon it. She chose to assume that it implied acquiescence in her last words—that, like herself, Freddy regretted her marriage and his own engagement, and that his eyes had been opened to recognize his natural affinity. Not then, however, nor until long afterwards, did she say this in so many words. Her behaviour at the time was both dignified and discreet. Rising to her feet immediately, but without absurd precipitancy or any show of virtuous indignation—"It is time for us to be going home," she said gravely.

During the long ride back to the wolds she made no direct allusion to what had passed; yet, when Freddy went up to dress for dinner, he knew full well that he had gone further than he had intended, and had been entirely misunderstood.

"I'm up a tree, I expect," he muttered to himself ruefully, as he brushed his hair; and

later in the evening, when he had said good-night and good-bye to Nina, and she had whispered to him, "Come down to Croft soon; I must see you before I go abroad again"—he reiterated this artless figure of speech: "I'm up a tree!—by George, I'm up a tall tree!"

He had been up so many trees of this kind before—had been tree'd, and, by hook or by crook, had always contrived to scramble down again—not without loss of dignity, nor without bruises and scraped shins; still alive and free. In his happy-go-lucky way, he supposed that he would get out of this predicament also. He started for Newmarket with the wise resolution to keep as much as possible out of Mrs. Gervis's way during the remainder of her sojourn in England; but he did not keep this resolution for two reasons: firstly, because Nina adjourned her move to Paris until after Christmas, and secondly, because he lacked the requisite courage. When he went to the Moated House, he was received after a fashion that frightened him out of his wits. Nina seemed to take it for granted that he was dying for love of her; she let fall a few passing words about her duty, told him that she could not allow him to visit her often—not more than three times a week, at the outside; absolutely

refused to listen to speeches which he had not had the most remote intention of uttering; and, in short, took up so determinedly defensive a position that he found himself involuntarily acting the part she had assigned to him, and making love, instead of running away. When he did go away for a time, she wrote to him; and on finding that he proposed to spend a week or two in London in the month of December, she arranged to pay a coincident visit of a fortnight to an old aunt of hers, who lived in Eccleston Square.

It was at this time that I received a note, asking me to dine with my cousins, those Knowleses of Stone Hall who have been incidentally mentioned once or twice in these pages. They had come up to town, during the frost, to do shopping and the theatres, it appeared, and I was informed that I should meet my friend Mr. Gervis at dinner. He was in the drawing-room when I arrived, and extended his little white hand, with a gracious assurance of the pleasure it gave him to meet me again after an interval of a twelvemonth, and to see me looking so well. I replied that I was glad to be able to return the compliment; and he shrugged his shoulders apologetically.

"I am very much ashamed of myself," he

said. "I continue, as you see, to inhabit the earth, to the great inconvenience of many people, and I cannot say that I am any worse in health than I was this time last year. At my age, and with the number of diseases which the doctors tell me that I am suffering from, I ought in common decency to have made myself scarce before this; but latterly I have consoled myself with the thought that, as it cannot be for my personal comfort that I am left in a world where it appears to be always raining or freezing, it must be as a humble instrument in the hands of Providence for somebody's good that I am spared."

He laid his head on one side, as he propounded this theory, and looked up at me from under his eyelids with that sidelong glance of his which gave him such a strong resemblance to a dapper old raven. In answer to my inquiries after his children, he told me that he had just returned from Paris, where he had left them both well; but he did not seem disposed to be communicative upon this subject.

"I myself," he said, "proposed to spend the winter at Southlands; but the draughts in that house must be felt to be believed in. After two days I took to my heels and fled. I have now given orders to the housekeeper to have

heavy curtains hung over all the doors, and to keep a fire burning in every room in the house, night and day, until she hears from me again. In the mean time I have found quarters in an hotel in Jermyn Street."

I expressed a hope that he was tolerably comfortable there.

"On the contrary, I am intolerably uncomfortable; but I am near the Turkish baths, where I spend a great part of my time, and where at least I do not shiver. If I knew who the man was who first introduced Turkish baths into this unhappy country, and if he is still living, I should like to put him down for a trifle in my will."

Our conversation was interrupted by the entrance of Freddy Croft, who, I thought, looked rather taken aback when he recognized my neighbour. I was at that time ignorant of all that had taken place in Lincolnshire, and could not make out why Freddy answered Mr. Gervis's urbane observations at random, and kept biting his moustache and glancing nervously in the direction of the door. But I was to some extent enlightened when I heard Mrs. Gervis's name announced.

"You have done it now, Maria," I whispered to my cousin; "you have put your foot in it this time."

"Good gracious me!" she returned, "what is the matter? You don't mean to say there is a family quarrel!"

"Why, my dear creature," I said, "don't you know that they have never met since the marriage? Let this be a lesson to you not to ask Lynshire people to your house another time without consulting me."

But my cousin—with terror, no doubt, in her heart, and an engaging smile upon her lips—was already shaking hands with Nina, who had sailed in, looking exceedingly handsome, in a dinner-dress which I roughly valued in my own mind at fifty guineas, not counting the lace.

I confess that if there is a thing that I enjoy looking on at, it is an awkward encounter between two people who know how to behave themselves. Mr. Gervis and his daughter-in-law got through theirs in a manner highly creditable to both of them. I suspect that Nina must have had a moment of preparation as she advanced up the room; for she said, "How do you do, Mr. Gervis?" and offered him her hand without any hesitation or embarrassment. He bowed over it, perhaps a shade more profoundly than is customary in these days, and for a moment I fancied that there was a twinkle in his eyes, as if the situation rather amused him;

but he half closed them directly, as his habit was, and the remainder of his features expressed nothing at all.

"I hope you have good news of Claud," said he, in his low, deliberate accents.

"Oh yes," she answered. "I heard from him a few days ago. He mentioned that he had seen you." And then she turned away to speak to some one else; and it seemed to me that Freddy, who had watched this meeting with evident apprehension, breathed more freely.

We had not been long in the dining-room before I began to gain an inkling of the complications with which the fortunes of the Gervis family were threatened. Freddy, who had taken my cousin in to dinner, had Mrs. Gervis for his left-hand neighbour, and from my position midway down the opposite side of the table I could observe the goings-on of this couple, which struck me as being eminently suggestive of mischief. Now, my acquaintance with Mrs. Nina dates from the days when she was a demure little lady in short frocks, and used to stir up envy, hatred, malice, and all uncharitableness in the hearts of her brothers' schoolfellows at children's parties, and I flatter myself that I know her little tricks and *minauderies* and the

meaning of them as well as anybody. When, therefore, I saw her practising these familiar wiles upon the young man at her side, and marked the shamefaced manner in which he responded to them—when I noticed the interchange of whispers and significant looks that passed between these two, and the furtive and guilty glances which one of them kept darting in front of him, to his right hand and over his shoulder, I was able to form a shrewd guess as to how matters stood. And ere long I became aware that I was not the only person whose attention was directed towards this quarter. Mr. Gervis occupied the chair facing that upon which Freddy was uneasily wriggling; and I perceived that he was employing the intervals of leisure afforded to him by his own abstemiousness and the fine appetite of Maria in a prolonged study of the culprits. Judging by the expression of his features, he was deriving an immensity of quiet amusement from this occupation. First he inclined his head over his right shoulder, and took an exhaustive survey of them from that point of view; then he shifted it towards the left, and had a good look at them from another angle—for all the world as you may see that wise bird to which Mr. Gervis has been likened hopping round an object which

has excited his curiosity before making a rapid peck at it.

After a time Mr. Gervis made his peck. "I suppose you know that Claud is about to produce another play?" he said, addressing his daughter-in-law abruptly.

If his object was to make her jump, he certainly succeeded. She was deep in subdued conversation when the sound of that peculiar voice, which was never raised, yet always distinctly audible, fell upon her ear.

"I—no; I had not heard," she answered in some confusion.

Mr. Gervis's eyebrows were raised ever so slightly for a moment. "Oh, indeed! Probably he intended to give you a pleasant surprise. The first representation is to take place in a few weeks, I believe."

"I am afraid I shall not see it then," answered Nina boldly. "Nothing is settled yet about my return to Paris."

"You do not like Paris, perhaps?" suggested Mr. Gervis blandly. "I am aware that some people do not. For myself, I think it is one of the few places in the world worth living in, and I should certainly establish myself there, if my doing so did not entail a residence in the Boulevard Malesherbes. I doubt whether the air of

that quarter is suitable for persons with sensitive nerves. What do you think, Croft? You were in Paris in the spring, I understand."

At this Freddy grew very red. "I didn't go to the Princess's house," he replied, staring.

"Ah, no—to be sure! I was forgetting." And Mr. Gervis sank back in his chair.

For the next hour and a half he continued to behave in this way. The luckless couple opposite were never safe from him for an instant. In vain they affected to have nothing particular to say to one another, and talked in needlessly loud voices about the hunting prospects; in vain they watched their opportunity, not venturing to resume their confidential intercourse until the enemy should be fairly engaged elsewhere. Without neglecting his social duties, he managed to keep his eyes—and for aught I know his ears also—open to their proceedings; and no sooner had he lulled them into a false security by entering upon suave political discussions with Maria—who is a scandalous Radical, I regret to say, and primed with recondite information as to the misgovernment of the country—than he would swoop down upon them with some innocent question or equivocal allusion which must have tried their self-control to the utmost. They came out of the ordeal

pretty well, Nina especially displaying considerable powers of fence and repartee; but no doubt they hated the man in their hearts with a perfect hatred. I am sure I should have done so, had I been in their place.

But it was after the ladies had left us that poor Freddy's time of trial came. Deprived of his capable and courageous little ally, he was no longer able to hold out against Mr. Gervis's veiled sarcasms, and collapsed under them ignominously. Not that anything of a very alarming nature was said to him; but I suspect that he recognized in Mr. Gervis only the mouthpiece of his own conscience, and that remorse, coupled with a distressing conviction that the man whom, of all others in the world, he would have wished to blind to his shortcomings was reading him like a book, united to render that calm, ironical gaze more than he could endure. Be that as it may, he very soon abandoned the strife, and fairly took to flight. Making a feeble pretence of looking at his watch and being astonished at the lateness of the hour, "By George!" he exclaimed, "I had no idea it was past half-past ten. Promised to meet a man at the club at eleven. I think, if you'll excuse me, Mr. Knowles, I'll just slip off, without going upstairs again."

And so, bidding us all a hurried good-night, he departed. We heard the hall door slam behind him presently; and I fancied him hailing a hansom, and being driven away, tearing his hair and cursing himself in his despair, like Ralph the Rover. If he passed a night of torments, he assuredly got no more than he deserved, and the sympathy of right-minded people cannot be claimed for him; but I, who knew him perhaps a little better than Mr. Gervis did, felt more sorry than angry at the turn which affairs had taken, and was pretty sure that Freddy was not the principal person to blame in this unlucky business. The histories of scrapes such as that in which he was involved are so uniform in their character that it required no great inductive powers to trace this one to its source; nor was I at all surprised when my young gentlemen turned up at my rooms, early on the following morning, with a very lugubrious countenance and a request for counsel and help.

He found me at breakfast; but declined to partake of my humble fare, giving me to understand that he was in far too acute distress of mind to think of swallowing food.

"I'll tell you what it is, Knowles," he cried, casting himself down heavily upon my favourite

arm-chair, without the least consideration for its springs, "I've a deuce of a good mind to go and hang myself."

I begged him not to risk the bathos of being cut down and haled before the nearest magistrate, and suggested that, as a preliminary measure, he should make a clean breast of his troubles.

Such, he said, was his desire; and he proceeded accordingly, with much self-upbraiding and many outcries against the cruelty of fate, to a full confession of what had occurred in Lincolnshire and subsequently, disguising nothing—not even that fatal kiss by the shores of the North Sea—and vowing (as I thought I remembered to have heard him do once or twice before) that, if he got out of this mess, no woman living, save one, should ever induce him to ride, drive, walk, or sit alone with her again.

When he had made an end of speaking, I cleared my voice, and addressed him at some length; and I felt it my duty not to deal over leniently with him. By his own admission, I said, he had been guilty of something more than folly and imprudence. Not only had he been false to his engagements and the dictates of his heart; not only had he allowed himself to be-

come involved in an intrigue with a married woman and the wife of his friend; but he must needs select, out of all the ladies in England, the one whose husband he hoped one day to greet as his brother-in-law. And all this at a time when his constancy was supposed to be undergoing a two years' period of probation! Comment upon such conduct was superfluous. Having premised thus much, I went on to make a good deal of superfluous comment; for indeed it is not every day that one has the chance of rebuking vice and folly, and haranguing sinners, as it were, from the judgment-seat of wisdom and virtue. I will say that he heard me in a becoming spirit of submission; and in due time I ceased scolding, and came to the chapter of practical advice.

I said, "Let us face facts. You have got yourself into a most unpleasant fix, and you must not expect to find a pleasant way out of it. It is not pleasant, I allow, to say to a lady, 'My good madam, you appear to be the victim of an hallucination. I am no more in love with you than I am with Queen Anne. So far from that, I am, as you ought to be perfectly well aware, very much in love with some one else. Under the circumstances, don't you think we had better agree to bury the past in oblivion,

and keep clear of one another, at all events as regards the immediate future?' I say, it is not pleasant to be forced to make such speeches."

"Good Lord!" groaned Freddy, "how's a fellow to say that kind of thing? One can't do it, you know."

"Nevertheless, my friend, you will have to do it. I don't say that you need use those exact words; but you must make the sense of them clear to her; and you must do it, too, in such a way as to render further discussion impossible."

"Oh, it's all very fine talking, and settling things in that off-hand style; but you don't consider her feelings."

"Her feelings! Why, you don't suppose the woman's in love with you, do you?" I cried scornfully, and perhaps a little unkindly.

Freddy scratched his head, and glanced up at me with a queer, deprecating look. "Well, you see—oh, you may laugh as much as you please; I don't mind—I believe she's fond of me. Anyhow, she *says* she is."

"I dare say."

"Yes; and when a woman gives you to understand that much, you can't quite—you're in a sort of way obliged to—oh, hang it! you

know what I mean. At first I thought she'd go away in a few weeks, and there would be an end of it; but then she put off her move till Christmas; and now, by George! she's put it off again; and I'm bound to go and see her, you know, and—and the long and the short of it is, Knowles——"

"The long and the short of it," interrupted the stern moralist to whom these halting confessions were addressed, "is that, having been fool enough to say some silly things which you never meant, you haven't the pluck to go back from them now, and prefer risking the best chance of happiness you have ever had, or are likely to have, to going through a disagreeable scene."

"You can put it in that way, if you like, I suppose."

"It doesn't greatly signify in what way it is put," I observed. "See here, Freddy; if you are really the poor, weak creature that you represent yourself to be, if you haven't the strength of mind to take the only straightforward course possible, you had better do as you did on a former occasion, and run away. Go to Egypt or to India, and stay there until your Nina has returned to the domestic hearth. Of course Miss Gervis will hear all about last night's

entertainment. You know better than I do whether she is likely to forgive you; but it stands to reason that she won't have anything more to say to you, unless you break with Nina directly."

Freddy shook his head despairingly. "There's no mistake about that: it's an awful business. But I don't quite see my way to making a bolt for it, all the same."

And when he was asked "Why not?" he could assign no more satisfactory reason than that there were some things a fellow couldn't do, you know. He stuck to this point with a persistency which surprised and puzzled me. I could not make out at the time, nor do I know now, what it was that rendered him so scrupulous. I do not believe that he was one whit enamoured of Nina; but I think it possible that her witcheries, while missing his heart, may have reached some other weak point in his mental system—his vanity, perhaps. He appeared, too, to have imbibed some curious, distorted notion that it would be dishonourable to desert her in the way that I suggested. I expended a good deal of ineffectual eloquence upon him. I did not want to appeal to his love for Geneviève, and flatter him by dwelling upon the suffering that his treachery would

bring upon her; but when, finding all other arguments unavailing, I finally made use of this one, the only effect it produced was to make him repeat his threat of hanging himself.

"There's no help for it," he sighed; "I'm a gone 'coon, I expect. I thought you, being a cleverer chap than I am, might be able to show me some way out of this; but it seems you can't. I shall have to let things take their course, and trust to luck."

His wrong-headedness put me out of all patience at last. "Go your own way, then," I said, "and the devil go with you! All I can say is that, since you are such a deplorable moral coward, Miss Gervis is well rid of you. Luckily she is young. She will get over this, and marry some better man before long, I hope."

He picked up his hat, and went away dejectedly and quite meekly. I was half inclined to call him back before he was down the stairs; but I resisted the weak impulse. I said to myself that there were some people who required to be ridden with a rough hand and a somewhat cruel bit. When he reflected over his situation in solitude, my harsh words would produce their effect, and he would see that this was no case for a compromise. If I had

pointed out to him a more diplomatic and less violent method of freeing himself from his entanglement, would not his facile nature have led him to flounder still more deeply into the meshes? I was obliged to tell myself all this in order to stifle certain painful misgivings that I had made a blunder. Alas! is not bullying always a blunder? I don't know whether anything that I could have said would have saved this misguided young man from the catastrophe towards which he was hastening; but I fear me that I did not make the best use of the opportunity that came in my way.

Freddy, as I afterwards learnt, went straight from my rooms to a house in South Kensington where he had arranged to meet Mrs. Gervis at luncheon; and very likely he told her where he had been. Very likely, also, she found out from him as much as she cared to know of what had passed between us.

Shortly afterwards they both returned to their own county, where their intimacy was not long in exciting remark. In the course of a few weeks all Beachborough and its vicinity were ringing with this new scandal; and Miss Pennefather, having taken counsel with Mrs. Pender, had openly announced that, under existing circumstances, she should not care to be seen

at the Moated House. What was Nina's object in thus damaging herself in the eyes of the world, and bringing misery upon people who had never injured her? It may, in the beginning, have been a spice of pique that urged her on; it may have been, as poor Freddy artlessly insinuated, jealousy of Geneviève, or, as my grandmother, with her customary plainness of speech, averred, "pure devilry." Who can attempt to get to the root of the motives of female action? One thing is certain; that Mrs. Gervis's habitual respect for conventionality deserted her in the present instance. She seemed determined to brave public opinion, and to take a delight in parading Freddy, attached to her apron-string, under the shocked gaze of Beachborough. She took to frequenting the Esplanade at the crowded hour of the afternoon—a thing she had never done in her life before—and there she was to be seen daily, marching up and down, her supposed admirer walking beside her with downcast and hang-dog mien—a tragi-comic spectacle.

One day she was ill-advised enough to call upon Mrs. Knowles, by whom she was received with a grim stare, which I dare say in no way disconcerted her. There happened to be several other visitors in the room at the time, and the

old lady did not address Mrs. Gervis until the latter rose to take her leave. Then Mrs. Knowles, to use her own expression, "spoke a few words to her for her good."

"I thought you were to have gone back to your husband before this," said she, in a voice sufficiently loud to be heard by all present.

"No; not just yet," answered Nina, sweetly. "He does not wish me to return until he has got a house for me." And in fact it was true that Claud's prospects entitled him to think of moving to a more fashionable quarter; and he had written to that effect.

"Oh, a house? And pray, what is the man living in now? A tent?"

"He is living in the Rue d'Amsterdam, Mrs. Knowles," said Nina, with increasing suavity. "Would you like me to give you the number of the house?"

"No, thank you. I can find out his address, if I should want to write to him, as I may do, perhaps, one of these days. If I were you I would go over, and help to choose that new house. I am told that people of high rank are rather fond of keeping up separate establishments nowadays; but you will find that in the middle classes, to which you and I belong, it is still customary for wives to live with their hus-

bands. I hope that, the next time you come to see me, you will bring yours with you. Good-bye."

It is easy to imagine the glee with which this rebuke was listened to by Mrs. Bagshawe and her kindred tabbies, and the withering glances that were levelled at the abashed culprit as she made her way out of the room. Nina has since been heard to declare that, of all the insolent and ill-bred people who dwell in Beachborough, my revered grandmother is far and away the worst.

And now—Fortune apparently having a grudge against her that afternoon—she was to receive an expression of open censure from a more humble section of the population. From time immemorial it has been the custom of the Beachborough boatmen and fishermen to congregate in groups upon the pavement, chewing, spitting, making use of that forcible vernacular by means of which they have been taught to interchange ideas, and otherwise rendering themselves obnoxious to the passers-by. As Mrs. Gervis proceeded along South Crescent in the deepening twilight, she encountered a knot of these lazy fellows, conspicuous among whom by his high stature and broad shoulders was our old acquaintance Tom Burvill. They

had had a fine take of fish in the morning, and Nina, yielding to an impulse with which I, for one, can readily sympathize, took out her pocket-handkerchief, and buried her nose in it, as she hurried past them. Now, Tom had been in funds lately, and at such times the Spotted Dog, the Red Cow, and the Jolly Mariners generally saw a great deal more of him than was good either for his pocket or his health. He had, as it chanced, recently emerged from the latter hostelry, where he had been fortifying himself against the cold to such purpose that his heart was light within him, and he had become as one to whom the world is a smiling vale of brotherhood and class distinctions as though they were not. No inherited residue of the feudal spirit, therefore, deterred him from staggering out into the road in simulated alarm, when he noticed Nina's gesture, and calling out—

"'Ere, Bill, come off o' that theer pavement, will yer, and let the lady go by. You ain't good enough fur to breathe the same hatmosphere with that young 'oman. Bless your 'eart, nothink ain't good enough for she! Fust 'twas her 'ome as wouldn't do; now 'tis her 'usband. Dessay it'll be her name next."

Want of courage has never been one of

Nina's failings. She turned round immediately, walked back a few paces, and faced Mr. Burvill.

"What is that you say?" she asked. "Just be so good as to repeat it, will you."

"I worn't a-speaking to you, marm; I were a-speaking to my mate," answered Tom, a little abashed.

"Then, another time, when you and your mate wish to insult ladies in the street, you had better choose somebody else to talk about, unless you want to be given into custody. And, as I am speaking to you, let me recommend you to stick to fishing, my man. It is a more profitable business than loafing in and out of public-houses, or even than snaring game. I assure you I have not forgotten you; nor has my father. More is known about you than you think for; and I warn you that, after this, Mr. Flemyng will have his eye upon you."

"Will he now, marm? Well, as soon's ever you git 'ome, jes' you give my respeckful dooty to yer par, and tell him to keep his heyes for them as wants lookin' arter. He ain't the only man as has heyes; and if him and me was to tell all we knowed—why, 'twouldn't do neither on us much good."

Nina did not deign to continue the altercation. She walked away, with her head in the

air; but she could not feel that she had got altogether the best of it. Truth to tell, it was nothing but pride that kept her from bursting into tears. She was one of those people to whom unpopularity is a grievous affliction; and this man's coarse insults, following upon Mrs. Knowles's lecture, were almost too much for her. What, after all, had she done to be treated with such cruelty? she demanded indignantly of space. If Claud did not want her in Paris, what right had any one else to interfere in the matter? As for her flirtation with Freddy, it had been a very innocent sort of flirtation, if people only knew. One must amuse oneself in some way or other. Poor Freddy! he was a dear little fellow; but he was not worth all this fuss. He had been very dull, too, lately, and she was beginning to get rather tired of him. "I think I will send him away to-morrow," she concluded.

Nevertheless, when the morrow came, she did not send him away. Upon further consideration, she had remembered that there was absolutely no other man in the neighbourhood whom she could substitute for him; and as she had now no intention of leaving Beachborough before the spring, she decided to retain him at his post, pending the arrival of a relief.

CHAPTER VII.

A RECOGNITION.

FIVE people were sitting round the fire in the Princess Ouranoff's luxurious *salon*, one evening late in January. The lamps behind them were all shaded; for the Princess, like many other ladies whose beauty has passed its first bloom, had a weakness for subdued light; and the flames, as they rose and fell among the logs, illumining with sudden gleams the tapestry curtains, the old pictures in their heavy frames, the inlaid cabinets, the statuettes and bronzes, and all the costly extravagances with which the room was a trifle over-encumbered, illumined also five contented faces. Two nights before, Claud's new play had been produced at the Théâtre du Colisée with a success surpassing his utmost hopes, and the author had awoke, the next morning, to find himself famous. Therefore it was that joy reigned in this little

family party. They had dined together, the Princess, Geneviève, Miss Potts, and Claud—M. Poinsot, who was the fifth person present, having become so unremitting in his visits to the Boulevard Malesherbes of late that they counted him as one of themselves—they had talked of little else than the play throughout the evening, and they were talking of it still.

"I feel as if I had written it myself," Varinka was saying. "If you knew the torments I have been suffering for weeks! You may believe me or not, as you please; but I have never been able to get a proper night's rest for thinking of what was coming; and now that we have gained the victory, I should like to illuminate the façade of the house for all Paris to see."

"We may all be allowed to claim our small share in the triumph," remarked Poinsot; "for I am sure we have felt our share of the anxiety. How is one to know what will please that great baby of a public?"

"If there has been a triumph," said Claud, "it is you whom we ought to thank for it; for, if it had not been for you, I should never have been able to get a hearing at all."

"Nonsense! What had I to do with it? I introduced you to Leroux a year ago, and I

promise you that he cursed me for my officiousness, with tears in his eyes, afterwards. He accepted your play, this time, upon his own responsibility; and if I had said much in its favour, I believe he would have rejected it."

"A year ago!" echoed Geneviève, gazing at the fire; "it hardly seems so much. Is it really a year ago that we were all sitting here, just as we are now, talking over the chances of *Amour et Amitié?* One might fancy we had gone back twelve months."

"Except that we have to deplore some gaps in our circle," remarked Miss Potts.

"Ah, yes; poor M. Hirsch! I wish he could have been here. I know he would have been as pleased as any of us. I must write to him to-morrow."

"*Àpropos*, where is he, that good M. Hirsch?" asked Poinsot, true to his rule of speaking well of everybody. "He was a man of——" Here M. Poinsot hesitated, searching in vain for some appropriate term of eulogy, and ended rather feebly with "amusing peculiarities."

The Princess made a grimace. It is possible that M. Hirsch, in his dealings with her, may have shown himself more peculiar than amusing. "He is at Nice," she replied, "where I hope,

for the sake of his health, that he will remain. It is madness for him to attempt to live in such a climate as this."

"In that case," observed Poinsot, with perfect gravity, "we can but resign ourselves to doing without him. But he is not the only absentee. We all await with impatience the good news of madame's return," he added, with a polite little bow at Claud, as though he intended his civility, bow and all, to be transmitted forthwith to England.

The representative of the absent lady smiled pleasantly, without replying. The past six months had worked no small change in Claud both inwardly and outwardly. From a handsome boy he had developed into what he is now, a singularly striking and fine-looking man. His Roman characteristics had become more strongly marked. He had the large limbs, the stately bearing, the gentle, serious air, that distinguish that ancient nobility; but in the soft, ox-like eyes which were his birthright, there had sprung up a new light, not inherited but earned—the light of conscious power. He was not elated by his recent honours; but he knew that he deserved them. He knew that he had something to say to the world, and that he had found out how to say it. He had emerged

from his chrysalis; the task that he had imposed upon himself was accomplished; and he could take breath and look about him, and draw up some programme for the future. Now, it is so far correct to speak of the period of his life through which he had just passed as a chrysalis stage in that, while it had lasted, his faculties had been so concentrated upon one aim that they had been virtually dormant as regarded all others. Voluntarily and deliberately he had given up his whole heart and soul to his work, telling himself that, when once the battle should have been fought, he would take up the threads of his existence where he had dropped them, renew the honeymoon of which the illusions had been so roughly dispelled, and begin a new and happier life with Nina. He had almost forgotten the manner of their parting; he had quite forgiven the little outbreak of temper and weariness which had led to it; he had seen nothing extraordinary in his wife's protracted absence, choosing to assume that she entered into his feelings, and, like himself, was only waiting for the dawn of a brighter day. I don't know whether such a state of mind is compatible with true love; but Claud unquestionably believed it to be so. And now, having awoke from his long sleep, he found himself a

little bewildered and out of his bearings, and, searching about him for those dropped threads, felt, as might have been expected, some slight difficulty in laying hold upon them. He had sent a lengthy despatch to Nina the day before, describing the favourable reception of his play, entering more fully than he had hitherto done upon financial topics, and proposing to her that she should shortly join him in his quest of some quarters more to her taste than those of the Rue d'Amsterdam. Would she come? he wondered, or would she prefer waiting till her new home was ready for her to establishing herself again in that little fourth storey with which she might well connect some painful associations? He was thinking of all these things while the mellifluous Eugène continued to roll out little civil phrases.

"It will not do to let madame attach herself too firmly to her native soil: she would be capable, perhaps, of robbing us of our author. She must be reminded that he belongs to Paris now, and that he has friends there who will not consent to lose either him or her without a struggle," etc., etc.

"*Cette chère petite!*" murmured the Princess, who had long since ceased to think about her bosom friend of the previous winter, if she

had not forgotten her existence altogether. "What was that you were saying, Claud, about moving to these parts? I know of an adorable little *appartement* in the Avenue de la Reine Hortense—a genuine bargain."

Claude smiled: he had no desire to repeat the disastrous experiment of putting himself under Varinka's guidance in his choice of a domicile. "My ambition does not soar so high," he said. "I thought of Neuilly."

"Neuilly! What an idea! As if one lived at Neuilly! But men never understand these things. Leave it to me; and I will fit you up a little nest that you will be contented with. I will begin to see about it at once," cried Varinka, who, when she found it impossible to cram any more furniture into her own rooms, delighted in nothing so much as in acting the part of agent for her neighbours.

She drew out her ivory tablets, and began jotting down memoranda, talking all the time about the bargains one could effect by attending sales, the exquisite Louis XV. chairs which she had seen at a curiosity-shop near the Luxembourg, and which were to be had literally for nothing—for a mere song—and so forth.

Claud did not try to check her, knowing

from of old the futility of such attempts, and she chattered on until, happening to catch sight of the clock on the mantelpiece, she saw that it was nearly the hour at which some of her friends might be expected to put in an appearance, and hurried away to add a few finishing touches to her charms.

While she was absent, a few of the men who possessed a standing right of entry into that hospitable *salon* strolled in; among others, Varinka's latest conquest, General Karakoff, a short, fierce-looking personage, whose high cheekbones, small eyes, and retreating forehead betrayed his Calmuck origin. He professed a great admiration for the Princess; but it was generally understood to be rather a love of baccarat than of her company that caused him to be so regular an attendant at her informal receptions. He was not popular among his fellow-gamesters, being a man of high and peremptory ways, and one who bore losses in no meek spirit. About a dozen people in all were chatting round the fire when Varinka reappeared; and at the moment that she did so another gentleman in evening dress was seen entering at the further end of the room. No one recognized him, as he threaded his way leisurely between the tables and chairs; but

presently a flash from the burning logs disclosed the familiar features of M. Hirsch.

"You!" ejaculated the Princess in the same tone of dismayed surprise with which she had greeted our friend upon a former occasion.

"Alas! yes, madame. '*On en revient toujours à ses premières amours.*' You see how vain is the attempt to live away from you. I have been courting oblivion at Monte Carlo with the usual discouraging result, and I return to you for sympathy and consolation. You see before you a complete wreck — heart, health, and pocket, all at the lowest possible ebb," concluded Hirsch, with his old grin and his old paroxysm of coughing.

The Princess shrugged her shoulders, but made the best of a bad job. Most of those present were already acquainted with M. Hirsch; she introduced him to General Karakoff, whom he had not met before. That warrior bowed in stiff military fashion, and measured the intruder from head to foot with a searching look, as if he knew of something to his disadvantage. The General had no love for his travelling compatriots, the greater part of whom, he was wont to assert, were nothing better than adventurers; and this one, as we are aware, was not blessed with a physiognomy

calculated to reassure the suspicious. Hirsch acknowledged the General's scrutiny with one of those ineffably impudent stares which he knew so well how to assume, and then, turning away, sank into an arm-chair beside Geneviève, who inquired kindly after his health.

"I thank you, mademoiselle," he answered; "my health is much what it generally is; that is to say, as bad as it can well be. The doctors tell me I may die any day; but they have been telling me that for the last two years, and I do not feel that I am any worse than I was in the summer—a little feebler perhaps. To confess the truth, I was not quite candid in what I said just now to our dear and amiable Princess. So far from having lost money at Monaco, I have been having an unusual run of luck there; nor was it for the pleasure of meeting her, nor because I had any anxiety that she should soothe my last moments, that I quitted that little paradise. I hope you will not think me very presumptuous, mademoiselle, if I say that it was a longing to see you once more that brought me back to Paris. When one has only experienced disinterested kindness from one person in the course of a lifetime, one cannot help craving for a repetition of the sensation. It is your own fault that you are annoyed by

the company of an old vagabond. Tell me; have you good news from England?"

Geneviève did not reply for a moment; she was always a little shy of her odd confidant at first. But seeing that he had noticed her hesitation and looked hurt by it, she hastened to answer him. "You know, I never have any direct news," she said; "but Claud hears sometimes."

"And all is well? Come! I begin to see land. We are already well into our second year, are we not? I must make an effort to live to the end of it. I have a fancy that, if I could first see you in possession of all that you wish for, I could depart more willingly for—for wherever it is that we depart for. So our solemn D'Arblay is married, I hear."

"Yes," answered Geneviève, laughing a little. "They said it was a *mariage de convenance;* but I believe he is perfectly happy with his wife. I am so glad. I always liked him."

"So did I; although I believe he honoured me with a noble dislike and contempt. To be sure, he was not peculiar in that. Do you know, mademoiselle, who is the only person, besides yourself, who has treated me like a human being since that evening when I first met you at your father's gates?"

Of course Geneviève knew; and of course she was ready to listen to as many praises of the absent paragon as M. Hirsch chose to pour into her ear. And so for a long time this wily sorcerer kept her enchanted with reiteration of the simplest spells—himself enchanted by her innocence, her freshness, and the halo of love and faith that was about her, as one who has been for years pent up in narrow streets feels his heart swell and tears rise into his eyes at the sight of the woods in spring.

Nevertheless, since acquired tastes are ever the strongest, and the indulgence of sentiment, though a sweet relaxation, cannot be trusted to satisfy indefinitely the wants of natures accustomed to more exciting stimulants, M. Hirsch began, at length, to move restlessly upon his chair, and to cast sidelong glances towards the violet velvet *portière* behind which three-fourths of the company had already disappeared; and Geneviève, perceiving his hankerings, was prompt to set him free.

She got up, saying, "I have kept you a great deal too long. Varinka will be wondering what has become of you, and will think you very rude if you do not join the others."

Whereupon Hirsch, with a deprecatory shrug at his own weakness, answered, "Oh, rather

than be thought rude!"—and withdrew, leaving Geneviève, her brother, and Miss Potts in sole occupancy of the room.

"I wish you would let us hear your violin, Gen," said Claud suddenly. "It is months since I have listened to anything in the shape of music, except that abominable barrel-organ which grinds out 'Le pied qui r'mue' under my windows three times a week."

But Geneviève demurred, alleging that the card-players would hear her.

"What—through all those doors and curtains? And if they did? I don't think they would be so much to be pitied, do you, Miss Potts?"

So Geneviève went away, and returning presently with her beloved instrument, played to them—subdued, flowing melodies, songs without words—and the souls of those three were filled with peace.

Did not all things, indeed, promise hopefully for them? And were they not justified in spinning webs of fancy, and dreaming dreams of the happy days to come? Even Miss Potts may have had her modest castle in the air, her vision of independence and three rooms of her own in the neighbourhood of a London square, and of occasional visits to a certain country-

house, where children with Geneviève's eyes would run out to meet her as she drove up from the station. For castle-building, happily, is not the prerogative of youth alone, and it would go hard with us mortals if we could not sometimes deceive ourselves with vain imaginings. These dreamers, therefore, sat comfortably nursing their several illusions until the fire had burnt itself down to a heap of white ashes and the hour for beauty-sleep was long past. Then the ladies went off to bed; while Claud, whose avocations had accustomed him of late to take his rest in the morning watches, sauntered towards the card-room.

He pushed aside the curtain, and passed into that hot and brightly lighted little room almost unobserved. Poinsot looked up, and nodded to him as he entered; but no one else seemed to notice him. The air was heavy and obscured with the smoke of the Russian cigarettes which Varinka used herself and provided for her guests. Claud helped himself to one, and, sinking down upon a divan, watched the players.

It was not a pleasing spectacle, nor one of a nature to promote respect for the rulers of creation. The Princess's friends were for the most part hardened gamesters, men of the

world, who had long ago learnt to receive Fortune soberly and resign her gifts, without a frown, if she shook her swift wings. They would have thought it a disgraceful thing to curse and swear over their losses, like that barbarian Karakoff; and no doubt, in the earlier part of the evening, their bearing was as impassive as the laws of good breeding could require, while at no time did they offend by word of mouth. But as the night grew old, they were wont to lose, or relax to some extent, their command of countenance; and so it was that Claud saw a circle of faces very different from those which had surrounded him in the drawing-room a few hours before. Some were pale, some flushed, nearly all were somewhat agitated, and all wore a disfiguring expression of greed. M. Hirsch, who, judging by the heap of gold and notes before him, had been winning largely, was perhaps the least altered of the company; but even he had a hungry, wolfish look. Varinka was almost hideous. She also was apparently among the winners; but the lust for gain was more strikingly marked on her features than on those of any of her neighbours. Her blonde locks were dishevelled, her eyes staring eagerly at the cards, the muscles of her cheeks drawn up, disclosing

her teeth; a multitude of lines and wrinkles showed themselves about her forehead and temples. She looked double her age at that moment. And yet Heaven knows that love of money was not one of her failings. Immediately after rising from the table, she would have handed over her winnings intact to any one who had chosen to beg for them, and would never have given the matter a second thought; but gambling was her ruling passion, and the demon of play her master. It consumed her, when she was under its influence, with a feverish craving to win; it made her eyes glisten and her slim fingers hook themselves at the sight of gold; it robbed her of all her graces, and metamorphosed her from a woman still young and attractive into a very hag.

Claud averted his eyes from her, with something of a shudder, to look at General Karakoff, who was only ridiculous. The General, whose luck, it must be confessed, was as bad as his temper, had lost a great deal of money, and took care that everybody should know it. His imprecations were poured forth in a continuous low growl, like the rumbling of distant thunder, rising, every now and then, into a louder explosion, as he dived into his pockets and dashed down the stake he had lost. He flung the

money across the table to the winners as if he would fain have thrown it at their heads; his bloodshot eyes glared angrily about him in search of a quarrel. But these amiable little ways were too well known in the Boulevard Malesherbes to excite any attention; and it was only M. Hirsch who responded to the General's outbursts by an exaggerated politeness, by an assumed timorousness, and by grateful acknowledgements of the sums handed over to him, which redoubled, as they were probably intended to do, the ire of that luckless warrior.

"Don't thank me, sir!" bawled out Karakoff at last. "Do you think I wish to present you with my money, *sacre bleu?* You have won—so much the better for you, and the worse for me! There is no need to talk about it."

Varinka looked up, with a mechanical soothing phrase—"*Allons, allons, mon cher Général, ne nous fâchons pas*"—and the game proceeded.

After a time Claud wearied of the bull-baiting entertainment provided by M. Hirsch, and perceiving that it was three o'clock in the morning and that no one showed any disposition to move, got up, stretched himself, and was preparing to retire quietly, when he was arrested by a singular exclamation—a sort of stifled roar

—from General Karakoff. He turned round, and saw the General standing up, leaning across the table, his face purple, his bristly moustache twitching, and his right arm outstretched in an attitude of denunciation towards M. Hirsch. For an instant Claud had a horrible fear that that unprincipled person had been detected in the act of withdrawing a card from his sleeve; but it was not anything quite so bad as that, seemingly, that was the matter.

"I have it!—I have it!" General Karakoff was spluttering. "The moment I set eyes upon you, I could have sworn that I had seen you before; and now I know you. Look at me, sir! Do you recognize me?"

Varinka looked frightened; but Hirsch, who was perfectly unmoved, complied with the request addressed to him, and, after a very long and deliberate scrutiny of the General, made a slight negative gesture. "I never saw M. le Général in my life before," he said urbanely. "M. le Général has the happiness to possess a face which, once seen, would not be easily forgotten."

"Ah, you do not remember me! Think again—Karakoff, formerly lieutenant in the 40th Cossacks."

Hirsch shook his head.

"I will refresh your memory," cried the other.

He tore off his coat, threw it on to the chair behind him, and, rolling up his shirt-sleeve, displayed a hirsute arm, on which the scar of an old wound was plainly discernible. "Look at that! Ah, rascal! you gave me something to remember you by when your cursed bullet shattered the bone of my left arm. No thanks to you that I have all my limbs to-day!"

"I have shot so many men, first and last," remarked M. Hirsch languidly. "I do not recognize the arm of M. le Général any more than his face."

Claud could not help laughing at the man's cool impudence; but the Princess had turned pale, and was clasping and unclasping her hands nervously.

General Karakoff dragged down his shirt-sleeve, and put on his coat again. "Whether you know me or not, I know you," he said. "Gentlemen, that man is an escaped criminal—an assassin, who would have taken the life of the Emperor, if he had not been arrested in time. His name is Ladislas, Count Ponetzky—and he is the husband of the lady who sits beside him."

Here was a pretty disclosure! The silence

of consternation fell upon the company; and it is to be hoped that the General enjoyed the success of his *coup de théâtre*. He looked round him for a minute or two with a malevolent smile of triumph; then, finding that no attempt was made to impugn his statement, he made ready to depart.

"Madame," said he, bowing low to Varinka, "I have the honour to wish you good evening. I am willing to believe that, at the time when you contracted a fresh marriage, you supposed, like others, that this miscreant was dead. I deplore your present unfortunate position; but I do not disguise from you that I shall denounce your husband at the Embassy in a few hours' time, as it is my duty to do."

And with that, he strutted out of the room.

The astonished gamblers sat agape, none choosing to be the first to speak. Varinka's little curly head was bowed down upon the table, her face hidden in her hands. Hirsch, with legs outstretched, hands thrust deep into his trousers pockets, and mouth widened from ear to ear, was staring straight in front of him into vacancy, and it seemed that consciousness of the humour which is an ingredient in all complete catastrophes was upon him. Thus they sat, with the scattered cards before them,

each one silent and motionless in his place, like the guests of Polydectes turned to stone; and how long this painful situation was protracted, and in what manner it came to an end, and what was said, and whether anything was said at all —these are details of which Claud has never been able to render an account. All he knows is that, after a time, Hirsch and he and the unfortunate lady whom he could no longer call his stepmother were free from the presence of strangers, and that he had dropped into a chair opposite the couple, and was awaiting explanations in bewilderment.

Varinka, with her face still hidden in her hands, was sobbing out disjointed lamentations.

"What have I done that such cruel things should happen to me? . . . Never shall I dare to show my face in Paris again! . . . I will not survive this disgrace! I will drown myself in the Seine! I will open a vein in my arm! . . . After all these years, and the money that I have spent, and the incessant anxiety and misery of it, that everything should be discovered at last by such an extraordinary accident! It is the most cruel thing that was ever heard of! . . . And now, too, when it seemed as if the end might be so near!" she added ingenuously.

Hirsch made a queer grimace at these words. "Too true!" he said. "It is a shabby trick of Fortune. I ought certainly to have died last winter. One must admit that her luck has been bad. I thought to myself that something must be going to happen when I saw how we both went on winning the whole night through."

He looked at the pile of gold that lay before him, swept it off the table and pocketed it, remarking, "There is balm in the memory of having despoiled that hideous animal of a Tartar." Then, after a pause, "I suppose you will wish to have the history of this business."

Claud signified that, if quite convenient, he should be glad to have some further information; and M. Hirsch, having lighted a cigarette with some deliberation, leant back, and composed himself into the attitude of one about to embark upon a lengthy recital

CHAPTER VIII.

A RETROSPECT.

"THE story of my life," began Hirsch—or Ponetzky, as he must now be called, "is an affecting narrative full of profitable lessons, which those who look below the surface of things might moralize and weep over by the hour together. I regret sometimes that it never occurred to me to write an autobiography, or at least to keep a rough diary, which might have been handed over, after my death, to some one like yourself, who could have given it to the world, converted into graceful language and interspersed with fitting reflections. You would have found it interesting, I think, as a study of the gradual deterioration of a character not inherently depraved, under various adverse influences, of which want of money has been the first and foremost. Had I been born rich, I can see no reason why I should not have

blossomed out into a philanthropist, and assuredly I should never have gained that disastrous knowledge of my fellow-men which led me, many years ago, to discard conscience in my dealings with them as a cumbrous luxury, fatal to all hope of self-advancement, not to say bare self-support. For, little as you may be disposed to believe it, it is a fact that I was once young, and as innocent as you are to-day. I am afraid you would hardly listen with patience to an account of my early years—which is a pity, as one would fain say a good word for oneself, and this is in all probability the last chance I shall have in my life of doing so; but I spare you, and will pass over all that I did and all that happened to me up to the time of my marriage with the Princess Ouranoff, when I had lost my youth and had preserved only a few traces of my innocence.

"We met in Dresden, to which place I had moved rather hurriedly a short time before. I was not precisely a political refugee, since nothing had been proved against me; but I had had the honour of several domiciliary visits from the police, and I considered it best to step across the western frontier in order to avoid taking a longer journey towards the eastward at the expense of the Government. I had spent

very nearly the last rouble of my patrimony; I was, as I always have been, unfit for any of the occupations by which men earn an honest livelihood, and I was seriously thinking of embracing the career of a highway robber, when the Princess appeared upon the scene, like a good fairy, and relieved me of all my perplexities. I married her uniquely for her money; not in the least degree out of love, which is a folly that has never troubled me much since my student days. I have, perhaps, the appearance of being a little ungallant in saying this in her presence; but we have no secrets from one another; and she found out long ago, what she might have known at the time, that nothing short of the direst necessity would have persuaded me into marrying a Russian. No! that is a thing that I would not have done—not if I had been as much in love with her as I understand that your father was. You, who were born free and belong to a free nation, it is impossible for you to conceive the hatred of a conquered people for its butchers and hangmen. It has been the strongest passion of my life; I believe it to be the strongest passion of which the human heart is capable. Even now—old as I am, and at death's door, and little as it can matter to me what happens in a world that I

shall be out of so soon—I swear to you that if I were to receive an order to-morrow to go to Petersburg and kill one of their rulers, I would start on the errand with joy. I would have killed that brute beast of a Karakoff to-night, if we had met in South America, instead of in a Paris *salon*, and I would have gloried in it. 'Abolissons la peine de mort, mais que messieurs les assassins commençent!' Yes! and did not the assassins of Poland merit death? Ah, if you had seen the infamies that I have seen!—fathers torn from their families, children dragged from their parents—— Do you know how many Poles were sent to Siberia in the year 1832 alone? Eighty thousand—not less. Those are things which one does not forget."

The man's mean features were transfigured for the moment; his voice, ordinarily husky and low, rang through the room; he paused, trembling and gasping for breath. Then an access of his terrible cough laid hold upon him, shaking him as a terrier shakes a rat, overpowering him, so that he sank back in his chair, his arms dropping and the perspiration breaking out upon his livid face.

A jug of lemonade stood upon the table. Claud poured some hastily into a glass, and handed it to him; and he drank it off, and so,

with closed eyes, fell into a state of exhaustion so like death, that the Princess started up and peered at him affrightedly. Presently, however, he raised himself, and lighting another cigarette with a shaking hand, resumed :—

"At the time I was speaking of I belonged to a society of which I do not wish to say more than that its rules were not framed to suit people who like to live a quiet life and do what they please with their own. It was no sooner known that the millions of the Princess Ouranoff were in my clutches than I promise you that I had to give an account of them ; and what with constant demands for money and sudden absences which I was unable to explain, it was not long before matrimonial harmony between my wife and myself was a thing of the past."

Varinka sighed heavily, and raised her eyes to the ceiling. "Ah, if that had been all!"

Ponetzky glanced at her. "Eh! she had other causes for complaint—who denies it? If ever there was an ill-used and unlucky woman upon the face of the earth, it is this poor dear Princess ; and it is a fortunate thing that nature has gifted her with a temperament which enables her to lay aside her troubles at a moment's notice. But there is no need to waste time in talking about that. Let it be

agreed, once for all, that she married an unprincipled adventurer, and that she has had to suffer for her folly.

"It was in the autumn of 1858 that I made my way to Warsaw, where preparations were in progress for the great insurrection which was always hatching and always being adjourned, and which did not finally break out until five years later. I had done what was required of me, and was intending to slip quietly over the border again, when I allowed the police to get hold of me in the stupidest manner in the world. There is a vile spirit, distilled in the country, which was a snare to me in those days, and I dare say that it was because, from considerations of prudence, I had vowed not to let a drop of liquor pass my lips until I should be safe back in Germany that I let temptation to do the forbidden thing get the better of me. You will hardly believe that I was persuaded to sit down and drink with a couple of strangers; but so it was. I don't know whether they drugged me or not: in any case, it appears that I told them more than enough to settle my business; and when I came to myself, I was securely handcuffed in a dark cell. One arrives at such positions by many roads; one leaves them only by one—that which leads to Siberia.

You have heard of those melancholy processions of prisoners which are to be seen, from time to time, passing through the villages of East Russia, escorted by troops of Cossacks. The world has always dispensed a great deal of sympathy (which is a cheap article) upon these interesting exiles; some of whom, however, get through the journey comfortably enough, riding in sledges, wrapped in furs, by day, and sleeping in good beds at night. I was among those who perform it on foot, with an occasional encouragement to step out in the shape of a cut of the whip or a prick from a lance. I can tell you that, before I had been a week on the march, I had resolved fifty times to make a dash to escape, with the certainty of being shot down for my pains; for my feet were soft, and every step was an agony to me. Unfortunately for the Princess and for others, I delayed putting this design into execution from day to day; and destiny willed it that the cold should be so intense, one night, as to prevent me from sleeping on the floor of the wooden station-house where some hundred of us were huddled up, dead beat, after a long day's tramp over the snow. I was lying there, thinking what a sweet delight it would be to beat out the brains of the officer who was stretched across the

doorway, snoring like a pig, when I caught sight of a horse-pistol which was lying on the ground beside him, close to his hand. On the wall was one of those lighted wicks floating in a glass of oil which one sees hanging before shrines. The feeble ray that streamed from this caught the brass mounting of that antiquated weapon, and gave me all kinds of strange thoughts. With presence of mind and a loaded pistol, one may go far. I fell to wondering whether it was loaded, and imagining what I would do with it if I could get hold of it, and picturing myself shooting the sentry outside and vanishing before the alarm could be given, till at last the desire to feel the thing in my hand became an irresistible craving which I had no choice but to obey. I crawled stealthily across the floor on my hands and knees, and presently I had grasped the pistol, and was kneeling beside the sleeping officer, listening to his heavy breathing. He was no other than the amiable Karakoff, it seems; but I never, to my knowledge, heard his name before I came to Paris, and as for his face, the Creator did not think it worth while to make more than one mould for those animals; and when I told the General to-night that his countenance, once seen, would not be easily for-

gotten, I only meant to imply that its ugliness would always make it conspicuous in civilized society.

"He troubled me greatly—that sleeping beauty. I calculated that, if I could get outside the door and shoot the sentry dead, the chances were about one in a hundred of my getting clear away; but to cross the threshold without moving that clumsy carcase was a sheer impossibility. In this strait an idea occurred to me. I bent over my Cossack, and began shaking him gently by the arm. When he opened his eyes, he saw me squatting beside him, with my finger raised to my lips, and the muzzle of the pistol within an inch of his forehead.

"How would you have acted in his place? As any intelligent being would have done under the circumstances, I imagine. You would have held your tongue, and recognized that I was master of the situation. But that Karakoff can never have been a man of the smallest *savoir-vivre*. He flung himself upon me, yelling as though the day of judgment had come; and I own that I was so unprepared for this preposterous behaviour that I sprang back, and did not pull the trigger. I recovered myself, however, as the sentry rushed in. I fired,

without aiming, at Karakoff; I saw him reel; I brought down the butt of the pistol with all my strength behind the ear of the soldier, who luckily had not all his wits about him, and I fled out into night, with the other Cossacks, whom the scrimmage had aroused, after me, like a pack of wolves.

"Never until that moment had I had any idea of the agility that was in me. The station-house stood, as those buildings always do, at the extremity of the village, and I had the sense not to make for the open country, where I must infallibly have been captured, but to dart down the street; and, what with the help of the darkness, what with doubling and crouching like a hare, I managed to baffle my pursuers for the time. When I thought it was safe, I headed back for the station-house, knowing that I should gain a little time in that way, and slipped across the road to a kind of farm-yard opposite, where there were outbuildings and sheds and a mud wall which surrounded the village. I ran towards this wall, purposely making as deep footprints as I could in the hard snow, and as soon as I had reached it, I took off my boots, and stole into a shed, where I concealed myself behind a stack of wood. There I remained, shivering and three parts

frozen, until morning. The Cossacks never came near me. I heard them galloping down the street and round the walls outside; but they did not enter the yard; and at length there was silence.

"If you think that I was rejoicing in my escape, it is because you have never experienced the effect of intense cold upon the courage. I do not mind telling you that, long before dawn, I had not a grain of spirit left in me. The convoy, I knew, would not leave the place before every nook and cranny in it had been searched; to creep out into the country would have been certain death; and as for my finding any one charitable enough to take the risk of concealing me, that was a forlorn hope indeed. Still, it was the only one that remained to me. With the first streak of daylight, a woman came out of the house to get wood; and to her I disclosed myself, fully expecting that she would instantly fly across to the station-house and give the alarm. But she proved to be one of the few people I have met on my way through the world who have possessed both good hearts and good heads. Never a word did she speak; but she beckoned me to follow her into the house, and pulling up a trap-door in the flooring by an iron ring, pointed downwards.

You may believe that I wanted no second bidding to hurry down the ladder which led to the cellar beneath. Presently this truly admirable woman brought me a loaf and a bottle half full of spirits, and whispered, 'Unhook the ladder, and drag it away out of sight.' This I did; and she immediately shut down the cellar-flap, and left me in total darkness. The bread and the good *vodki* put heart into me. I must have been some hours in the cellar, I suppose; but the time did not seem long; and at length I heard the trampling overhead which I had been expecting. The Cossacks had struck my trail; but, finding no footprints on the further side of the wall, had detected the trick, which indeed I had only intended to be a temporary blind. They had now settled in their wise heads that I must be somewhere in the house; and the consternation of my good woman at the idea that there could be a man concealed about her premises was a thing to listen to with delight. And then it was that her daring and wisdom became manifest; for, after taking them into every room and opening every cupboard in her establishment, she stopped of her own accord above the cellar-flap, and pulling it up roughly, let in a streak of grey light. 'What if he were down there?'

cried she. 'How would you have a man jump into such a hole as that without breaking his legs?' asked a voice which I recognized as that of the captain in command of the troop. 'It is true! We never use the place; but it seems to me that there used to be a ladder there. Ivan, was there not a ladder here once?' 'You know very well,' returned a grumbling voice, which I took to be that of her husband, 'that the shortest ladder we possess is twenty feet long, and that is outside in the barn.' So the trap-door was shut down again with a bang; and my Cossacks marched out, leaving me rubbing my hands and praising the cunning of this worthy couple.

"However, there is no character but has its small defects; and theirs was an excess of caution. For four days and nights they kept me down there in the dark, lowering buckets of hot water to me to keep me from freezing to death, but refusing to listen to my entreaties to be allowed to return to the surface. 'All in good time,' they said; and I am bound to confess that in harbouring an escaped prisoner under their roof they were exposing themselves to the chance of highly disagreeable consequences, and giving proof of a disinterestedness of which not many peasants would be capable. All this did not

prevent me from cursing their prudence from the bottom of my heart; for to sit twirling your thumbs in a dark cellar, with the thermometer below zero, for ninety-six hours at a stretch, is the very devil; and if you doubt me, try ten hours of it, and see how it amuses you. When at last I did ascend from those infernal shades, it was clear that my good hosts were less anxious to listen to my assurances of gratitude than to get rid of me. To take myself off was the best return I could make to them for their humanity; and it is curious how often in my life I have found this form of thanks the only one likely to be acceptable.

"When I tell you that the village where these events occurred was situated some fifty versts to the eastward of Ekaterineburg—that I left it with literally nothing in my pocket, except seventy-five copecks, which the farmer handed to me, after a little hesitation—that it was long before I ventured to approach any city—that at last I reached Schistopol, which must be at least six hundred versts from Ekaterineburg—that I worked my way thence down the Volga and the Don to Taganrog, and that for two years afterwards I lived from hand to mouth in Turkey, in the Danubian principalities, and in Austria;—when you have realized the meaning

of this, you will understand that I must have gone through adventures enough to fill a volume. I am not going to fatigue you with a recital of them. If a man wants to live, and can neither earn, beg, nor borrow enough to keep life in him, what is he to do? I have already told you that I was not overburdened with delicate scruples even in my prosperous days: in the course of those two years I may say, without flattering myself, that I became as accomplished a blackguard as could have been found in Europe. You will wonder, perhaps, why I never wrote to my wife. To tell you the truth, I was cowed. I thought I had killed that officer, and I had no wish to fall a second time into the hands of the Russian authorities. Besides, I had broken finally with the past, as I thought. Circumstances had so degraded me, body and mind, that I could trace no connection between myself and the man who used to call himself Count Ponetzky, and to put on a clean shirt every morning; nor did I greatly care about standing in his shoes. Give me plenty of brandy to drink, fools to swindle, and a roof of some sort or kind to cover me, and I asked for nothing more.

"It was destiny or chance, not any will of mine, that put me in a position to re-assert my

matrimonial rights. The great charm of an adventurer's life lies in its uncertainty and its swift leaps from misery to fortune and back again. In the year 1860 a run of luck landed me at Wiesbaden, with a decent coat on my back and enough money in my pocket to enable me to amuse myself at *trente-et-quarante*. I had not been there a week when I had the pleasure of seeing my wife enter the Cursaal on the arm of a gentleman of distinguished appearance. They looked so happy together that I was quite prepared for the information which was given to me at their hotel, that they were a newly married couple. I ought, you will say, to have vanished instantly. Not a doubt of it; but after what I have told you, you can hardly suppose that I should trouble myself much with the question of what I ought to do. What I did do was to waylay the Princess on her way back from the springs, the next morning, and to reveal my identity. Upon my word, I was very sorry for her. I heard from her that a circumstantial account of my decease had reached Petersburg, where I had been represented as having been shot dead while making a desperate effort to escape. It does a man no good, you understand, to admit that he has let a prisoner slip through his fingers; and I dare

say the brave Karakoff got compensation for his broken arm. She offered me anything—everything—to go away, and not let myself be seen again; and naturally I had no objection to make to such an arrangement. But, on descending to details, we were unable at once to agree as to money matters, and so we had one or two interviews—which was imprudent and unfortunate. For it seems that, in the course of one of them, Mr. Gervis chanced to catch sight of us, with our heads close together, engaged in earnest discourse, and he formed the conclusion which I suppose that most husbands would have formed in such a case. When he questioned the Princess, she allowed him to think that his suspicions had some foundation: what could she do? I really regretted it extremely. Your father, it appears, is not one who forgives easily. You know upon what terms he and the Princess have lived all these years; and now you know the original cause of their breach. What additional causes may have arisen since, I cannot pretend to say——"

"There have been no additional causes," broke in the Princess indignantly—"none, at least, of the kind that you mean. But you always believe the worst of everybody; it is

your nature to do so. Claud, you see what this man has been to me—how he has spoilt my whole life. But he has not told you all. Ever since that day at Wiesbaden he has been a continual burden to me—and what a burden! *mon Dieu*, what a burden! If he had invested all the sums he has had from me, he would be able to live like a prince now. Often I could not give what he asked for—literally I had not enough. I was compelled to apply to your father: you may guess whether it was very pleasant to me to do that. That poor Gervis! I have said hard things of him sometimes, because he irritated me, and because he is a man whom one cannot make angry; but he has never refused me money, and he has never asked me questions. He detests me, and no wonder! —but, in spite of all that has passed, I shall always consider him as my husband. As for the other, he has told you himself that he is not the same man whom I married so long ago. Oh, if you knew the frights he has given me, the promises he has made and broken, the times and times when he has only wanted a hundred thousand francs or so to make his fortune, after which he was to trouble me no more. And then the same history over again! Would you believe that he bought mines—gold

and silver mines—out there in Peru? A droll kind of mines! The gold went into them, instead of coming out of them, and it was I who had to supply it. And all this in vain! Am I not right to say that I will kill myself?"

Varinka fell back into her former despairing attitude, and Ponetzky, who, during this tirade, had been nursing his knee, and watching, with a perfectly unmoved countenance, the smoke from his cigarette as it drifted upwards, resumed:—

"The Princess has summed up the history of fifteen years with admirable conciseness, and has left me little more to say. I assure you it has been with unfeigned regret that I have caused her so much annoyance at different times; but necessity has no law. The silver of the Ural Mountains has found its way to the Andes, and has remained there. Who can fight against Fate? The uncertainty of mining speculations has been so brought home to the English nation of late years that I am sure I need not dwell upon the subject: my repeated failures explain themselves. I may, however, say that I should have kept my promise of not returning to Europe if, about two years ago, the Princess had not seen fit to break off all communication with me and to refuse me any further aid."

"I had sent you a fortune the year before, and you had promised that you would never ask me for more as long as you lived!" cried Varinka.

"Quite so. I am explaining my conduct, not justifying it. Now, it so happened that I was at the last gasp at that time. I just managed to pay my passage to Southampton, and landed in England almost without a *sou*. It was then that I made my way to Southlands on foot. From what I had been told, I fancied that I should find the Princess there, and when I learnt that she had left, I was at my wits' end. In fact, I was reduced to such extremities that the only plan I could hit upon was to try and get the price of his liberty out of Mr. Gervis. I accordingly informed him that I was in possession of an important secret, and that I would engage to set him free from his wife in consideration of a certain sum——"

"You did? You actually dared to do that?" exclaimed Varinka. "Is it possible that there can be people so wicked and so treacherous!"

"——Which, however, he declined to pay. He was very insulting, I remember; and I was fool enough to lose my temper with him. Well; he has got his freedom now, without paying for it."

There was a long silence, during which Claud tried to collect his ideas. His chief feeling was one of great compassion for Varinka, upon whom the visitations of Providence seemed to him to have fallen with most unmerited severity; and what possible comfort could be offered to her in her affliction was a problem beyond his powers of solution. He had been scarcely shocked by the shamelessness of M. Hirsch, which had struck him as too exaggerated to be genuine; and indeed it may well be that that cynical gentleman had chosen to depict himself in his darkest colours; though I see no reason to suppose that he had related the facts of his history otherwise than correctly.

"I am more sorry for all this than I can tell you," Claud said at length.

"The fortune of life," remarked Ponetzky sententiously. "There is not much use in being sorry."

Not much, indeed. Claud rose, and took a turn or two up and down the room, stroking his chin in perplexity. "The question is," said he, "what is to be done next?"

"There is only one thing to be done," cried Varinka, starting up also; "I must leave for St. Petersburg instantly. The Emperor cannot refuse me an audience. That wretch will

certainly go to the Embassy, as he said; and he will tell his own story. What a misfortune that he should have lost money here! They are sure to think that the whole thing is a plot. I wonder whether they will telegraph. In any case, his Majesty will see that I have lost no time——"

She stopped in front of a mirror, and uttered a cry of dismay—"Heavens! how frightful I look! This is the appearance one gets by sitting up all night and abandoning oneself to these violent emotions. I wonder whether Annette is awake—I wonder how long it will take her to pack up?"

Already she had forgotten her threat of suicide. The colour was returning to her cheeks; she was bustling about excitedly, eager to begin her preparations for a move. "I shall never see Paris again—never!" she exclaimed suddenly; and the tears rushed into her eyes again at this terrible thought. But she brushed them away. "I have not the time to cry. Yes; I must start immediately. Claud, there is an *Indicateur* in the drawing-room. I must take the first train."

"And you?" asked Claud, turning to Ponetzky, who was leaning back in his chair in a posture of calm repose.

"I? Oh, I shall return to Nice in all probability; but I am in no hurry. General Karakoff may denounce me at every Embassy on earth, if he pleases: it is not in their power to molest me. The Russian Government would not think of demanding my extradition; and if it were demanded, it would certainly be refused. The case of the Princess is different. She has estates, which are liable to confiscation, and she would act prudently in seeing the Emperor, and in convincing him—as no doubt she will do without difficulty—that she has had no share in any treasonable iniquities of which I may have been guilty, and that she deplores my existence as sincerely as any one can do. We are not likely to meet again after this, and I will now bid you good-bye. If I might do so without too much presumption, I would ask you to take my farewell also to your sister, with the grateful thanks of an outcast whom her kindness has sometimes allowed to forget for an hour or two what he is. I will not ask you to shake hands with me."

The fact is that Claud did hesitate for a moment; and then, feeling ashamed of his hesitation, shook the poor rascal by the hand rather more warmly than he would otherwise have done; but without speaking. While he

was casting about him for something to say which should not have either too severe or too priggish a sound, Varinka called to him querulously from the other end of the room—

"How long are you going to keep me waiting for that *Indicateur?* Take a candle and search for it in the *salon.* I know it must be somewhere about."

But there was no need for a candle. A grey light was making its way through the chinks of the shutters; and in the drawing-room Claud found an early housemaid, dusting and sweeping. When he returned to the card-room Ponetzky was gone, and Varinka had once more relapsed into floods of tears.

"I don't know what I shall do, or what will become of me! I cannot bear to go away like this, and leave Geneviève—and it may be ever so long before we meet again! They will let her come and see me sometimes, will they not? She promised me once that she would never allow anything to prevent her from doing that."

Claud said he was quite sure no objection would be raised to such meetings. "But I think," he added, "I ought perhaps to take her to Southlands now."

"Of course you must. She could not remain here after I had gone away. How terrible it

all is! That ill-natured, spiteful little ogre of a General! Was it not just like him to make a scene? He might at least have waited until the others had gone. I feel as if I should never be able to hold up my head again—never! Do you think people will laugh at me?"

"No; I don't think so. Why should they laugh?"

"They will—I am certain they will! And I hate to be laughed at. Why do not they have direct lines from Paris to all the principal places in Europe? One ought to be able to make one's journeys without changing carriages. Those railway people seem to take a fiendish delight in adding to one's discomforts. Not that it matters to me: I have done with railways. I shall go and hide myself among those horrible forests that belong to me in the government of Perm, and end my days there, seeing nothing but savages and wild beasts, like St. Basil. Is it possible, I wonder, to engage a *coupé-lit* at least as far as Berlin? I wish you would send somebody up to the station to inquire. Oh, and Geneviève will have to be told about this! You must tell her—I could not! It would break my heart."

After this characteristic fashion the Princess rambled on, while she studied her railway

guide ; and Claud sat patiently beside her, feeling that, since mute sympathy was all that he could offer, he ought not to bestow that small consolation upon her grudgingly. At length she sent the *Indicateur* spinning across the floor with a despairing ejaculation.

"Those trains are incomprehensible!" she cried. "Please go and see about sending somebody to the station. I suppose the men are up by this time. And when you have done that, you might bring Geneviève to me. Only be sure to let her hear everything first ; my nerves are completely unstrung."

Geneviève and Miss Potts, who kept English hours, and breakfasted together between nine and ten o'clock, were not a little astonished to find Claud waiting for them in the dining-room, still in full dress, and presenting the unwashen, unshaven, and disreputable appearance of a man who has been up all night. He told his story as briefly as might be, and, having conducted his sister to the dreary room where poor Varinka, in her lace and jewels, was seated among the scattered cards, the burnt-out candles, the empty glasses, and the cigarette-ashes of the night before, shut the door hastily, and left the two women together.

On his way out he begged Miss Potts to see

that everything was got ready for an early start the next morning, and then hurried to the Rue d'Amsterdam to change his clothes and make the arrangements which his own sudden departure rendered necessary. He sent an ambiguous telegram to his father, merely stating that something unfortunate had happened, and that he was bringing Geneviève home; after which, he had to go to the newspaper office, the theatre, and elsewhere; so that it was evening before he reached the Boulevard Malesherbes again, and found the Princess's carriage, and an omnibus loaded with trunks, waiting at the door.

Varinka was in the drawing-room, no longer tearful, but pale and subdued, like a child who has cried itself out—a poor little disconsolate figure in her heavy travelling-furs. The tender-hearted Miss Potts, touched by the sight of her loneliness, would fain have accompanied her to Russia, and when Claud entered, was still protesting, even at the eleventh hour, that she wanted but five minutes to put on her bonnet, and would then be prepared to start for Pekin, if necessary. But the Princess shook her head.

"I must always be alone now," she said, rather pathetically; "and I had better accustom myself to it."

Then came a painful scene of leave-taking. The Princess kissed them all in turn, begging them not to forget her, to write to her sometimes, and to forgive her if she had ever been unkind to them. "Because," said she, "I have never meant to be so."

Poor little woman! I think that statement of hers was truthful, as well as sincerely made. She clung a long time to Geneviève, but was far less demonstrative in her grief than Claud had expected her to be, and went away at last quite quietly, her face concealed under two thick veils. From the window they saw her step into her carriage, and presently she was driven away, followed by the omnibus containing her luggage and a small retinue of servants.

And so the old life had come to an end for ever; and Miss Potts, looking round the deserted room where they had been so happy together less than four and twenty hours before, ejaculated solemnly, "It is well for the man Hirsch that he is not here now! I could not answer for myself if I were to find him within reach of my arm."

CHAPTER IX.

THE LESSONS OF EXPERIENCE.

To condemn our neighbours upon insufficient grounds, to misunderstand their motives, to start from false premisses in judging of their actions, and generally to make a disastrous failure of our attempts at insight into character is so every-day an experience that those of us who have lived forty years and more in the world have grown accustomed to it, and find no great difficulty in pardoning ourselves for blunders of this kind. With our present imperfect powers and opportunities, we can but reason by appearance, analogy, induction, and so forth, and when these methods fail, and things prove to be not what they seem, the fault evidently does not lie with us. If, for instance, a man takes some pains to present himself to me in the light of a sneering, cold-blooded egotist, is it my business to seek out

countervailing evidence, and to reveal that under an assumed mask of selfishness there lurks a modest man, whose pleasure it is to do good by stealth? One is sorry to have been too hard upon a fellow-creature, even in thought; but hard thoughts, when all is said and done, break no bones; and doubtless, by way of compensation, the generality of people think too hardly of us.

But to the young and candid mind consciousness of past injustice brings, as is most proper, some humiliation and remorse; and therefore it was that Geneviève, during the journey from Paris to Boulogne, did not cease to reproach herself for the hostility which she had maintained, all her life long, against her father. Seen in the light cast upon it by recent disclosures, all that had rendered his conduct odious to her in the past struck her now as not only excusable but honourable; what she had taken for vices displayed themselves boldly as virtues; and in the fulness of her penitence she constructed a suffering hero out of one who perhaps merited such a character as little as that of the unfeeling monster for whom he had hitherto done duty in her estimation. Was not that chill impassibility but another name for patient resignation? That perpetual irony,

those caustic remarks, what were they but evidences of the noble pride which disdains to show its wounds? The truth was that Geneviève, while fully participating in the feelings with which her father must have seen his wedded bliss shattered, had forgotten, among other things, to take into account the healing processes of time, and had no doubt at all but that, as soon as Mr. Gervis should have learnt that his wife had not been false to him in the way that he had imagined, the hardness of his character would melt, like snow in spring, and that he would look forward hopefully to that not far distant day when Varinka might once more be free, and when she and he and the children who loved them both might be reunited, never to be estranged again.

The repentant Princess had spoken much to her of his generosity, of his forbearance, of the love she had had for him in days gone by. Geneviève herself could not, on looking back, call to mind any unkind actions of his; and if there had been a somewhat conspicuous absence of kind words, she, at all events, was not entitled to regard that as a grievance. The memory of her obstinate prejudice astonished her. She admired Claud, who had known how to appreciate his father, and comparing her own

conduct unfavourably with his, felt that nothing that she could do in the future could ever atone for the aversion and neglect of so many years. She had said as much to Varinka, who had not contradicted her. They had mingled their tears in a common contrition; and probably neither of them remembered, while thus engaged, who it was that had first set the girl against her father, and who had filled her young imagination with fables of spies and plots and the dark designs of a mysterious foe.

As regards these bygone accusations, I am inclined to think that, at the time when they were made, the Princess believed in them firmly —as firmly as she afterwards believed that the severance of the slack tie that bound her to Mr. Gervis was a profound grief to her, and that the dissimulation which she had found herself obliged to practise upon him had been the great burden of her life. It may almost be said of poor Varinka that a long course of mendacity had so honeycombed her moral nature that a true feeling of any kind was no longer possible to her, and that what she took for love, hate, grief, remorse, and the like were but phantasmagoria of those sensations, retained by memory, summoned up by fancy, and brought into play as occasion might require. How far

her attachment to Geneviève was genuine, how far it was a mere reflex of self-love, is one of those questions which observers of my humble calibre do well to leave alone; but it is certain that her sadness at parting with the latter was as near an approach to reality as anything about her could be, and that she had been honest in saying that she felt it as the chief of the misfortunes that had overtaken her.

Geneviève, too, was sad; but her sadness was mitigated by more considerations than one. Poor M. Hirsch, it was evident, could not last long; and it seemed to her that, when once his troubles were at an end, those of many other people would be ended also. Moreover, the discovery of a father in the place of one who had only been a father in name was surely a subject for thankfulness. Nor would it have been in mortal nature to feel that an affliction which brought her nearer to Freddy Croft was altogether devoid of redeeming features. Geneviève more than forgave her father—she very nearly went the length of being grateful to him—for the ordeal which he had imposed upon her, and which was now entering upon its final term. It was, after all, a proof of affection. What more natural than that he, who, as he supposed, had been the victim of an over-

hasty marriage, should desire to shield his daughter from the danger of a similar mischance? But when he should have been put in possession of the truth as regarded his own case, would not his opinion of human constancy necessarily change for the better? And would he not readily cease to oppose a match to which he had never professed to see any inherent drawbacks? As Geneviève sat in the railway carriage, she had many prophetic visions of a softened Mr. Gervis embracing his repentant child and extending the right hand of respect and friendship to Freddy Croft; of a happy family circle, into which even Nina was to be admitted upon terms of sisterhood, and of future golden days, when the past, with all its misunderstandings and heart-burnings, should be a thing to be looked back upon without pain.

Being in this tender and sanguine mood, it was something of a shock to her to be received at Southlands with all the cold formality which pertained to the old order of things. There is no express train from Folkestone to Beachborough, and it was not till between nine and ten o'clock that our travellers, tired and worried with the changes and delays of their journey, reached the latter place, and got into the carriage which was waiting for them at the

station. Mr. Gervis did not come out to the hall-door to welcome them, on their arrival. They found him in the dining-room, sipping his Burgundy and perusing the *Pall Mall Gazette*, just as of old, and he rose languidly and shook hands with each of them, without displaying the faintest curiosity as to the cause of their sudden return. Had they dined? he asked; and on hearing that they had not, he rang the bell, and told the butler that dinner would be wanted in a quarter of an hour. He then re-seated himself, observed that it was abominably cold and that they must have had a rough passage, and informed Geneviève and Miss Potts that they would find fires in their bed-rooms. The ladies took this hint, and retired; and as soon as they were gone, Claud, who, like most bearers of ill tidings, was impatient to get his task discharged and done with, opened fire.

"Governor," he began, "I have got some bad news for you."

"Then, my good fellow," said Mr. Gervis, "pray keep it to yourself until you have eaten something. I can wait; and so, no doubt, can your news."

"I think I had better tell you at once," said Claud.

"I think not," answered his father decisively. "Your doing so would only bring half an hour of great discomfort to me and to yourself; because, when the ladies came down, we should be obliged either to ignore something unpleasant that we all know of, or to talk about it —both of which courses would be objectionable. Whereas, if you will go away now, and wash your face (which, let me tell you, requires it), we can get through our dinner in peace, and confront calamity later with the antidote of tobacco."

So saying, Mr. Gervis returned resolutely to his *Pall Mall.* He had so completely assumed his company manner when Geneviève returned, and talked to her after so agreeably polite a fashion about music and Paris and other subjects of general interest, that she was compelled to postpone to some more propitious moment the delivery of those filial speeches which she had rehearsed by the way. Only, when she took up her bedroom candlestick, she could not help departing in one small particular from her general practice. She gave Mr. Gervis's hand a slight pressure, and said, "Good night—father."

It was the very first time in her life that she had so addressed him, and as he shut the door

behind her, he turned to Claud with raised eyebrows and a queer look on his face.

"May I ask," he inquired, "whether you heard that endearing appellation?"

"Oh yes," answered Claud, laughing rather uneasily; "I heard. You don't mind, I suppose."

"Mind! My dear fellow, I am enchanted. I gather, however, from that, and from the portentous sighings of Potts, that I am about to be informed of a bereavement. Come to the billiard-room. We can smoke there; and I suppose we ought not to smoke in the library, now that we have ladies with us. I have furnaces kept up in every room in the house; and when I am alone, I spend the greater part of the night in prowling about from one to another and heaping on more coals. Allow me to direct your attention to that door-curtain," continued Mr. Gervis, who, while he had been speaking, had been slowly moving towards the billiard-room. "Feel the weight of it; observe how it is shotted at the bottom. I have defeated some of the most piercing draughts I ever encountered in that way, and I think I may say that most of my doors are now air-tight. As for the windows, the victory rests for the present with them. I have tried strips

of felt, india-rubber tubing and sand-bags, all without any appreciable result, and if they do not bring about my death first, I mean to have those absurd sashes torn out and replaced by windows on the French system, which look better and can be made to shut, if necessary."

Nothing could exceed Mr. Gervis's cheerfulness and amiability. To all appearance, he had not the faintest apprehension of the impending thunder-clap. He handed his son a cigar, remarking that one of the few advantages of living in England was that one could get real Havannahs there by paying three or four times the proper price for them; he pointed out a neat little cabinet on castors, containing refreshment in the shape of soda-water and various liqueurs; finally he dragged a chair close up to the blazing fire, and sank into it, crossing his legs, screwing up his eyes, and surveying Claud with his head very much on one side and the air of a man who expects to be entertained by some novel or amusing exhibition.

But perceiving that Claud shifted from one foot to the other, and fixed a frowning stare upon vacancy, not knowing how or where to begin, he took pity upon him, and removing his cigar from his lips—"Allow me," said he

pleasantly, "to offer you a helping hand. I guessed what must be the intelligence you were bringing as soon as your telegram reached me. The Princess has, of course, found her elective affinity at last, and vanished from the scene. I have always anticipated——"

"Stop, governor," interrupted Claud; "it isn't that at all. Don't say anything more; you might be sorry for it afterwards."

"Indeed? Then I confess that I am at a loss, and must leave you to tell your tale in your own way. But pray do not worry yourself over it. I believe I may safely promise you that nothing that you can have to say will cause me much distress. I am an ironclad—or rather I am an earthwork, into which any number of projectiles may be fired without making a breach."

Thus encouraged, Claud related, in an abridged form, all that he had heard from Hirsch-Ponetzky. He entered upon his task with some nervousness and some curiosity. He had not taken his father's boast quite literally, and indeed would have been sorry to believe him so callous; but in what way this news would affect him was more than Claud's knowledge of the man enabled him to surmise; and the glances which he stole, from time to time,

at that white, impassive face told him nothing at all. But, as the recital proceeded, it became evident that Mr. Gervis was more moved than he wished to appear. He allowed his cigar to go out; something like a sigh escaped him several times; once he raised his hand involuntarily, as if to shade his eyes, but, recollecting himself, let it drop again immediately.

"So that was Ponetzky!" he said at length. "And he would have told me all about it for twenty thousand pounds, poor devil! It is curious that I should not have suspected this—really very curious! I might have guessed—once, long ago. Perhaps I ought to have guessed. It is a fortunate thing that I did not, you say. Well, that depends entirely upon what one's definition of fortunate things may be. My own impression is that, if I had found out the truth at once, I should have been spared a good deal of—annoyance. And if that man had had the common decency to get himself shot by one of those yellow-faced South Americans, a good deal of annoyance would have been spared to others. But the longer I live, the more distinctly I see that everything invariably falls out for the worst in this worst of all possible worlds. I think, with your permission, I will bid you good-night now; we

will talk over this again to-morrow morning. You will want to be going over to the Moated House, I suppose ?"

Claud said he had thought of doing so.

"Ah—well, don't go until you have seen me. Good night."

And so Mr. Gervis left the room with his slow, dragging step, looking, Claud thought, very old and bowed.

But at breakfast, the next morning, he had apparently recovered himself, and was unusually talkative. Varinka's name was not mentioned ; but from several passing allusions, Claud, who came down late, perceived that the new order of things was no longer to be regarded as a secret, and that his father and sister had been already discussing it.

Mr. Gervis, indeed, admitted as much on the terrace, whither Claud and he repaired half an hour later. "Geneviève has been saying all sorts of kind and civil things to me," he remarked. "She thinks, it appears, that I have been a much-injured man, and that she, among others, has failed to do justice to my many sterling qualities ; and so she is anxious to make a handsome reparation. She spoke very prettily. So did I. It is a pity you could not hear us."

Mr. Gervis paused, laughing a little, at the

end of the terrace-walk, and looked down the valley towards Beachborough and the sea, which were half hidden in the haze of a mild winter's morning. "There is something rather pleasant about these reconciliations," he resumed presently, "even though one knows that they are built upon sand."

"How built upon sand?" Claud asked.

"I mean that this is a reaction; nothing more. I have always had a—liking for your sister, and I dare say I have understood her pretty well, seeing that hers is not an incomprehensible character; but it is utterly impossible that she should either like or understand me. The last she will certainly not be able to do for a matter of ten years to come at least; by which time I shall have reverted to my original dust. At present she is pleased to take me for something that I am not, and probably never was. She tells me that that unfortunate Ponetzky is at the point of death; and I believe she is really looking forward to the day when I shall lead the Princess to the altar a second time, and bring her home to Southlands for a sort of senile honeymoon."

"You won't do that, I suppose?" said Claud interrogatively, poking holes in the flower-beds with the point of his stick.

"Do you think it likely that I shall? Do you think the Princess would enjoy living here, or that she and I could play Darby and Joan with success? I admit that, if she had been your mother, it might have been our duty to sacrifice ourselves for the sake of our children; but happily no such necessity is laid upon us. We were virtually separated within a year of our marriage; we have been separated ever since; now we are legally separated; and I think we may exchange mutual congratulations upon our release."

Mr. Gervis had resumed his walk along the terrace while he was speaking. He now took his son's arm, and led him farther away from the house.

"You are not in a hurry?" he asked; and, without waiting for an answer—"Then let us take a turn through the grounds. Some time or other we must have a talk about family matters, and as the subject is not a very pleasant one, we may as well get rid of it at once, and not recur to it. I will not deny that the news which you brought me last night startled me, and that for some hours afterwards I almost felt, like your sister, that there had been an unhappy mistake, for which nobody was very much to blame, and that, some day soon, we

might shake hands all round, let bygones be bygones, and live happily ever afterwards, like the people in the story-books. I need not say, however, that common sense re-asserted itself before the morning. You must know that, a good many years back, I committed the folly of falling absurdly in love with the Princess. So far, no doubt, I may count upon your sympathy. It is true that I had not the excuse of youth; but then it is proverbial that there is no fool like an old fool; and the fact is that I was as much in love with my wife as—shall we say as you were with yours?"

"Don't use the past tense in my case, please," said Claud, laughing.

"I apologize—as much in love as you *are*. If, in the course of a year, I discovered that my angel had certain earthly proclivities, I turned my eyes away from them, like a sensible man; but when she distinctly gave me to understand that the man with whom I had seen her talking at Wiesbaden was her lover, what could I do? It seems to me that, considering what the circumstances were, I behaved remarkably well, and made far less fuss than most people would have done. Those who choose to make false statements must bear the consequences of them. The temptation to deceive me was strong, I

allow; but you will hardly urge that it was my happiness that she had in view when she adopted that particular form of deception. I cannot, therefore, feel that she has left me much in her debt. To you I can speak more openly than I could to Genevieve; and I do not mind telling you that, even if this irrepressible Pole had never reappeared, I should certainly have had reasons before long for going my way, and letting the Princess go hers. She has accused me sometimes of setting spies to watch her. I never did anything of the sort; but you may imagine that there have always been plenty of good-natured people anxious to keep me informed as to all her—friendships, and the details of them. In short, if I had wished to get my marriage dissolved, I have no doubt that I could have managed it easily enough."

"Poor Varinka!" sighed Claud. "It is a pity."

"What is a pity? The pity is not that our marriage turned out badly—which it was absolutely certain to do—but that it ever took place at all. Matrimony, my dear Claud, is a deplorable institution. As a cause of human misery, I should rank it second only to drink; and I am by no means clear that it ought not to take the first place. In the present state of society

it is, I grant you, a necessity; but I can well believe that in a more enlightened age it will be looked back upon with horror, as a senseless and degrading slavery, invented by semi-civilized man as a safeguard against immorality, but not even justifying that inadequate *raison d'être*, and itself profoundly immoral in the wider and truer acceptation of the term. For what," continued Mr. Gervis, stopping to face his astonished companion, "can be more absurd than the assumption that the woman with whom you have happened to fall in love is the one best suited to order your dinner, to sit opposite to you, all the days of your life, while you eat it, to nurse you when you are ill, to bring up your children in the way they should go, and all the rest of it? A year, or, at the most, two years of married life are sufficient to cure you effectually of a fancy which might otherwise have lasted for an indefinite time; and then what remains to you? In all probability a woman whom you would have died rather than married, if you had known what she was."

"Well, but," observed Claud, "that does not seem to prove much against matrimony as an institution; it only goes to show that one should be careful whom one marries."

"Exactly so. I speak of the institution as it

works to-day—not as it would do, if raised to an ideal state of perfection. Under the ideal system, one would, of course, marry the cook, provided that she were honest, sober, industrious, and cleanly, it being clearly understood that neglect of her duties would render her liable to divorce. But now consider what matrimony in its present shape means. It is simply a leap in the dark; and naturally it is apt to result in broken shins. The absurd custom is that, as soon as a youth has become enamoured of a maiden, and has received her assurance that his affection is returned, the pair of them hurry off to get married, and to destroy the sweetest and most innocent dream of which our fallen nature is capable. When the man wakes up—which he does with marvellous celerity—he finds himself tied by the leg for life. And to what? Perhaps to a shrew, perhaps to a flirt, perhaps to a confirmed sulker or an absolute idiot. One in a hundred, we will say, discovers that he has espoused the ideal cook—the excellent creature, who will discharge her household duties with cheerfulness, devote herself to her children, and treat him, in a general way, as if he were the eldest of them. That man is happy and blessed. But the remaining ninety and nine are disappointed and disgusted. They have

made an irreparable mistake, and it is a poor consolation for them to know that they have only themselves to thank for it."

Claud observed that he was acquainted with a good many married men to whom this description hardly applied.

"I agree," returned Mr. Gervis, "that the majority are unable to care very greatly about anything for long; but their lives are not the less spoilt because they have attained to a certain dull resignation. Let us, however, take the not very rare case of a man of keen sensibilities, strong affections, large capacities for happiness. Disappointment is apt to turn such a one sour."

"Perhaps it might not turn him quite so sour as he supposed," said Claud, who thought he began to see the drift of these general remarks. "But don't you think that, if he allowed it to do so, he would be making his mistake worse than there was any necessity for?"

"You have anticipated the very observation I was about to make," answered Mr. Gervis placidly. "A wise man, when he comes to review the situation, cannot fail to see that he has no right to let such a poor thing as a woman be a permanent affliction to him. Women are only adjuncts of existence; the

world belongs to the men; all of whom have, or ought to have, interests wholly independent of women in it. You, for example, would have your art, in which you have now a good prospect of excelling. A woman is, after all, no worse a torment than a full-grown, able-bodied flea. In some respects, indeed, she is less troublesome; for you can get rid of a woman at any time by the simple expedient of walking into the next room, and locking the door behind you; whereas the only sure way of escaping from a flea is to tear off all your clothes—which is not always practicable upon the spur of the moment."

"I think you're rather too hard upon women, governor," Claud's love of fair play prompted him to remonstrate. "Perhaps, if we heard their side of the question, they would have a word or two to say against us."

"A word or two? A million or two of words, more likely. Doubtless all humanity is reprobate; but you recollect the result of Solomon's search—'One man among a thousand have I found; but a woman among all those have I not found.' My own small investigations point to a similar conclusion. I confess that I have a poor opinion of women. If they do not deceive you in one way, they will in another;

and even when they can no longer deceive you at all, they will not give up trying. Their whole nature is saturated with deceit; their very virtues are made up of it. The qualities which render a woman charming are nothing else than adroit humbug, pretence, and dissimulation. When you hear a man extolling his wife, you may safely conclude that he is an ass, and that she knows it. I tell you a woman's life is one long course of duplicity from her cradle to her grave. *Splendide mendax* she may be, upon occasion; but *mendax*—always."

The writer feels quite shocked and alarmed as he sets down these disgraceful calumnies, and cannot help venturing to remind any ladies into whose hands this work may fall that the sentiments just recorded are Mr. Gervis's, not his own. The writer yields to no man in veneration for their sex. So great is it, in fact, that he has never yet deemed himself worthy of being allied to any member of it.

Claud was simply amazed by all this unwonted loquacity. He was made to walk along all the winding paths of the garden, up to the top of the hill, down through the wood, and back again to the house, Mr. Gervis holding him by the arm, expounding and moralizing; and it was not until past one o'clock that our

innocent hero began to suspect that his father had, for some reason or other, been talking against time. What helped to confirm this suspicion was the half-smothered sigh of relief with which Mr. Gervis consulted his watch, and discovered that the luncheon-hour was at hand.

"You will have to defer your visit to the Moated House till the afternoon," he observed. "By-the-by, shall you be passing through the town on your way?"

"I can do so, of course, if you have any commission that you want me to execute there," answered Claud; "but it is two miles round."

"So much as that? But you will avoid the muddy lanes by taking that line, and I suppose you are not in any very desperate hurry, are you? Would it inconvenience you extremely to take a note to Mrs. Knowles for me?"

"Not at all," answered Claud, wonderingly.

"Then I will give it you after luncheon. And would you be so kind as to deliver it in person? I think she may very likely wish to send me a verbal reply."

Claud promised to carry out these instructions; and in due process of time he was shown into Mrs. Knowles's presence, and handed her the square envelope which bore her name, written in Mr. Gervis's distinct little hand.

Now, this note is one among the many documents bearing upon the history of the Gervis family which have found their way into my possession. It lies before me on my writing-table at this moment, and I here append a true copy of it.

"My dear Mrs. Knowles,

"Will you do a charitable act, and say a few words to prepare this boy for the catastrophe which appears to be imminent? I find that my touch is not delicate enough for the task. I am anxious to prevent his finding his wife and young Croft together; for, between ourselves, he has a devil of a temper concealed somewhere about his inner economy; and one would fain avoid rows. By dint of the most exhausting efforts, physical and mental, I have kept him at home all the morning, and I have made an excuse to write to Mr. Flemyng, mentioning casually that he was here; so that there ought to be a fair chance of his finding Mrs. G. alone when he presents himself. He will tell you the reason of his return to this country. He has brought Geneviève with him. Upon the whole, it looks to me as if we were upon the eve of a *culbute générale.*

"Yours,

"V. G."

For a combination of shrewd common sense, honesty, and kindliness, I know of few people to compare with my grandmother; but with delicacy of touch I am unable to credit her; and that that skilled diplomatist Gervis should have based his appeal upon her supposed possession of this gift certainly sounds a little oddly. As, however, his utterances were seldom to be construed in a strictly literal sense, it may be that it was upon other grounds than those put forward that he had made choice of Mrs. Knowles as his co-operator; and, as a matter of fact, she acquitted herself of her task better than most people would have done. She read the letter and put it into her pocket, without remark; and when she had heard the whole story of the Princess and Ponetzky, and had delivered a few trenchant comments thereupon, she bent her head, so as to bring those sharp old eyes of hers to bear upon Claud over her spectacles, and attacked him point-blank with—

"Does it strike you that your father's system of going one way and letting his wife go another is a sensible one?"

"She wasn't his wife, as it turns out," Claud observed. "Of course, if she had been ——"

"If she had been, it would have been his duty to stick by her through thick and thin,

wouldn't it? He had married a flighty little woman, and he must have known that, if she was left to her own devices, she would get into mischief. A man takes his wife for better, for worse, and it is his business to look after her. At least, that is my conviction; I don't know whether it is yours."

Claud said he believed it was.

"Then why don't you act up to it?" asked Mrs. Knowles, turning upon him with sudden sternness.

"I understand what you mean," said Claud, reddening a little; "but I assure you that mine is not a parallel case."

"Begging your pardon, I assure you that it is. Some women can't do without a man perpetually dangling at their heels, paying them small attentions, and so on. It is sheer meat and drink to them, and you can't deprive them of it. The Princess Ouranoff seems to be one of those women; and your wife is another. What possessed you to send her trapezing all over England by herself, and then to leave her in a place like this, where she could have nothing on earth to occupy her mind?"

"If you have anything disagreeable to tell me, will you please say it at once?" broke in Claud rather grimly.

"Well," answered Mrs. Knowles, after a short pause, "it is just this. Your wife has been going on in a way that doesn't quite suit the notions of the good folks hereabouts, and your father thinks you had better be told of it. That was what he wrote to me about, if you want to know. He appears to have been afraid that, if the news were not broken to you gently, you might lose your temper and create a disturbance; but I give you credit for a little more sense, and therefore I tell you the truth plainly. There is no occasion to make a fuss over it. Be off to Paris as quickly as you can, and take your wife with you. And bear in mind that, if she has behaved a little imprudently, it is your fault as much as hers."

"Perhaps you are right," said Claud, sighing; "perhaps I ought to have foreseen this. If you knew all the circumstances, you might not think me so much to blame; but let that pass. I am much obliged to you for telling me; and I promise you there shall be no disturbance," he added, with a faint smile. And then he took up his hat to go.

"Stop a moment," said Mrs. Knowles. "We may as well have the whole murder out while we are about it. You know, idle young

men are not quite as common as blackberries in these parts; and I suppose that when Mrs. Gervis felt it to be absolutely necessary that she should have somebody to walk up and down the Esplanade with her, she naturally gave the first choice to an old friend."

"Surely you cannot be speaking of Freddy Croft!" cried Claud, his face changing.

"Why not? Don't you think he is silly enough for that?"

Claud made no reply; but he tightened his grasp of the walking-stick which he carried significantly, and there came a look about the corners of his mouth which Mrs. Knowles, who was watching him, doubtless interpreted correctly.

"That's right!" said she. "Go off and thrash him—you are twice his size, and you will be able to manage it easily enough. And when you have succeeded in taking away your wife's character, breaking your sister's heart, and starting a scandal which will be talked about for the next ten years, come back here and report progress. I shall be curious to hear what step you will propose to take next."

"What would you have me do?" exclaimed Claud. "You appear to think very little of this; but to me it seems one of the most

abominable pieces of heartless treachery I ever heard of. It is of Geneviève, not of myself, that I am thinking. I believe this will almost kill her."

"I don't suppose it will do that; but no doubt she will have a hard time of it, if you are determined to play the fool," returned Mrs. Knowles, drily. "Well, it's an ill wind that blows nobody good, and Beachborough will be eternally grateful to you, that's one thing. How do you think of proceeding to business? Will you go over to Croft, and beard the monster in his den, or will you lurk about in the side streets till he shows himself upon the Esplanade, and then sally forth and administer the drubbing publicly?"

Claud turned white; and Mrs. Knowles, looking at him, thought to herself, "Oho! so the temper is there, sure enough."

But he kept it down.

"I don't think it is very friendly to turn me into ridicule when I am in trouble, Mrs. Knowles," he said quietly.

The old lady got up and laid her hand upon his shoulder. "I don't want to turn you into ridicule, my dear boy; I only want to prevent you from making yourself ridiculous, if I can. I know how you feel; and I acknowledge that, if I were in your place, I should long to lay

my stick across that silly little fellow's back. There!—will that satisfy you? But you mustn't do it. You must think of others; for that is a gentleman's first duty, I take it. There is no more harm done as yet than can be set right by your removing your wife across the Channel. If you will only keep cool, and act like a sensible man, I firmly believe that all will come right; but you must try to think only of your sister for the present. I have no wish to say unpleasant things about anybody; but I suspect that Freddy is not the chief person to blame for this foolish flirtation. When once you are safely over in Paris, you can have it out with your wife; and if you choose to lock her up in a dark room for a day or two, and keep her upon bread and water, I'm sure I shan't blame you. Still, if you will take an old woman's advice, you will not be too hard upon her. When it is a case of two people spending their lives together, a little unearned forgiveness is a better thing than a well-deserved beating. Now go; and good luck go with you!"

It is to be regretted that these words of sage counsel should not have been the last that Claud heard before entering the Moated House. Unfortunately, Fate ordained that, just as he was turning out of South Crescent, he should

meet an individual whose meddlesome tendencies have brought him into notice before this in the course of the present history. Tom Burvill was, I dare say, neither more vindictive nor more given to self-deception than his betters, and very likely he persuaded himself that he was only discharging a painful duty when, after respectfully greeting his old patron, he proceeded to put him in possession of certain facts which, as he said, were the talk of the whole place. So far, there would have been no great mischief done; for he had little to tell that Claud did not already know; but Tom, alas! was a man of scant refinement, and the terms of which he thought fit to make use in speaking of Mrs. Gervis and her goings on were more plain than elegant. And then he chose to wind up with a most unlucky statement.

"They wus a-kissin' and a-huggin' under that theer cliff no later'n yesterday mornin'. Yes, that they wus!—I seen 'em," he declared.

Now, it really had not occurred to Claud that matters could have gone so far as this; and it must be acknowledged that, when he heard his disgrace thus blazoned forth by the mouth of a common fisherman, he forgot Mrs. Knowles's warning, forgot Geneviève, forgot everything, except his own cruel case, and started off up the hill with deadly rage in his heart.

CHAPTER X.

IRA BREVIS FUROR.

The Italian people, to whom Claud was indebted for many gifts besides his handsome face, have a wholesome dread and detestation of anger. They recognize it as not so much a sin or a folly as a malady to be shunned. "Mi fece far cattivo sangue," they will say, almost pathetically, of one who has injured them; as though the rousing of wrath were in itself an injury more than sufficient. For to them anger means a great deal more than it does to us. It is indeed a *brevis furor*, a whirlwind of passion, paralyzing the will, obscuring the brain, and leaving him who has been attacked by it exhausted and ill, and often oblivious of what he has done while the fit was upon him. It is a steadfast belief of theirs that a man in a rage is not accountable for his actions. Hence that leniency towards all quarrels in which the knife

is whipped out, and that determination to find an extenuating plea for every unpremeditated crime of violence, which so scandalize the sober British traveller. Claud, as he strode along miry lanes and across ploughed fields, making straight for the Moated House, and swinging his stick as he went, was assuredly not master of himself; and it was well for the peace of mind of Mr. Gervis, who knew something of Italian blood and its properties, that he could not see his son at that moment.

The young fellow's head was swimming and all his pulses throbbed. There was a mist before his eyes, so that he blundered and stumbled continually, and found his way across country more by force of instinct than by purpose. As he neared his destination, sundry familiar landmarks, seen through that red mist, smote him with a sharp pain that gave the spur to his fury. There was the white park gate, with its troublesome, old-fashioned latch—the gate through which he used to ride twice a day in that far-away summer time; yonder, beyond the naked branches of the trees, was the stagnant lake, with the summer-house in which Nina and he had spent a certain memorable afternoon; and now the garden was in sight, and the spreading cedar-tree where her ham-

mock used to hang, and the lawn where she had defeated him so easily at lawn-tennis. Seeing all these things, he ground his teeth, cursing the day when he had met her first, and pressed on.

Whither was he hastening so fast? and what did he intend to do? He has since confessed to me that he had not the faintest idea. "The truth is," he says, "that I was in a hell of a rage—if you will allow me to use a profane, but expressive, phrase—and knew no more whom I was about to attack than an infuriated wasp does. I wanted to get at somebody—that's all I know."

Such being his state of mind, it was fortunate that he could not make his way into the house without first ringing the bell, and that a brief space of time was thus afforded to him in which to recover possession of his senses. He had somehow fancied that he was descending upon that house like an avenging spirit, and that its guilty inmates would shrink away affrightedly on his approach; but the butler who opened the door for him manifested neither alarm nor surprise, having doubtless been already informed of the wanderer's return. He said Mrs. Gervis was in the "libery," he believed, and would Claud please to walk this way?

Thus our hero was ushered into the presence of his wife in the ordinary and conventional manner, and so far from displaying the noble anger of the lion, was conscious of entering the room with something of the appearance of having his tail between his legs. For Nina, as he perceived at once, was not alone; and he had enough of discretion left to shrink from making a scene before a third person. She was sitting beside the fire, and, oddly enough, she had on a costume of that same combination of brown and red as she had worn on the autumn afternoon which had just been brought back to Claud's remembrance. It was not the identical dress, to be sure—for when did Nina ever keep a dress eighteen months in her possession?—but Claud noted the coincidence, and forthwith a couplet started up into his memory:

> "I saw with half-unconscious eye
> She wore the colours I approved."

It was in all probability nothing more than a coincidence; but it served to sober him a little.

Mr. Flemyng, silver-haired and imposing, in his black velvet coat, stepped forward from the hearthrug, and held out a large white hand. Then Nina also rose, and advanced; and what

was Claud to do? He says he doesn't know whether he kissed her or not, but supposes he must have done so.

"We heard from Mr. Gervis that we might look for the pleasure of seeing you this afternoon," began Mr. Flemyng in his pompous voice; and Claud immediately wondered whether Nina had purposely arranged that her father should be in the room when he arrived. Whether it were due to accident or design, the presence of this wordy old gentleman prevented what might have been a very awkward encounter; and during the endless oration upon which he embarked Claud felt all the passion that had been in him ebbing slowly away. He did not know what the man was talking about; he was conscious only of the well-known sound of those rolling syllables and of the booming chest-notes that were being hurled at his ears, and of a growing sense of the absurdity of the situation. The latter feeling increased to positive amusement when at length he came to an understanding of Mr. Flemyng's remarks, and realized that he was being voluminously pardoned for having run away with Nina more than a year before. He could not help glancing at his wife to see whether her father's unconscious irony was apparent to her; but she was

holding up a fire-screen to shield her face from the blaze, and was scanning the flights of Cupids depicted upon it with that patient, far-away look which all who saw much of Mr. Flemyng soon learnt to assume; and it was impossible to tell from her manner how much or how little she heard of what was being said.

Mr. Flemyng talked on and on. Having exhausted the subject of runaway marriages, he now proceeded, out of compliment to his son-in-law, to discuss that of French plays, and criticized the modern school of dramatic authors somewhat disparagingly. France, he was pleased to say, was the only country in which the theatre could be considered as still existent; but even France had sadly degenerated. She could boast, it was true, of a certain number of clever, but slight, writers, who enjoyed a not undeserved reputation. Their works, however, were scarcely designed to be other than ephemeral. Where was the Molière, where was the Corneille of the nineteenth century? (Molear and Corneal, he called them.) Claud observed that the nineteenth century had produced some painters, though there was neither a Raphael nor a Michael-Angelo among them; and he added that a modern Corneille would probably find some difficulty in inducing a manager to

accept his long-winded sublimities, or a public to listen to them. No sooner had he uttered this rash criticism than he perceived the trap into which he had fallen; for Mr. Flemyng promptly let loose upon him such a flood of quotations, assisted by appropriate elocution and action, that there was no room for doubt but that he had been leading up to this point, and that he was fresh from a perusal of the works—or, more probably, of an essay upon the works—of that eminent man.

Mr. Flemyng, spouting lines from *Médée* and *Le Cid* in the most grotesque of Anglo-French, would have been a comical spectacle enough, if Claud had been in the humour to enjoy it; but it was not for such a purpose that he was at the Moated House, and he was beginning to debate seriously with himself whether he had not better say point-blank that he would be glad of half an hour's private conversation with Nina, when his father-in-law suddenly recollected that he had an appointment to keep in Beachborough, and, with many apologies for leaving so abruptly, took himself off.

Claud was now alone with his wife; but the denunciatory mood had passed away from him. He approached her slowly, and stood, with his elbow resting upon the mantelpiece, looking

down upon her, while she continued to study her fire-screen. And so, for a few minutes, they remained, neither of them moving or speaking, each waiting for the other. At last Nina looked up.

"Well?" she said.

"Well," returned Claud. For indeed the horrible unpleasantness of the scene which he foresaw was beginning to make itself apparent to him, and he was sensible of a cowardly longing to stave it off.

"What has brought you back to England so suddenly?" she asked. "Mr. Gervis said in his note that you would explain."

"There has been a trouble about Varinka," Claud answered.

"Oh, a trouble about the Princess," said Nina, with evident relief in her voice. No doubt she had anticipated that the trouble, if there were any, would be found to relate to some one nearer home.

"Yes; everybody will have to know about it before long, so there is no use in making a secret of it. Her husband, Count Ponetzky, who was supposed to have been killed a year or more before she married my father, has turned up."

"You don't mean to say so! Poor thing!

how dreadful for her! But at the same time, how interesting! Do sit down, and tell me all about it."

Claud did not sit down—he had a feeling that it would be easier to say what must presently be said standing—but he related, as succinctly as he could, the circumstances which had made him decide upon bringing his sister home. "I should have written to you to say that I was coming," he added; "but there was not time; and I did not think it worth while to telegraph."

"Of course not, why should you? So that man Hirsch was really Count Ponetzky. What a sinister-looking creature he was! I wish I had noticed him more; but he was so rude and disagreeable that one didn't care about talking to him much. I always thought there was a mystery connected with him, and I knew he got money out of the Princess; but I never suspected the truth. I fancied he knew something about her; that he had been—that she had seen rather more of him in her earlier years, you know—something of that kind. I used often to feel very sorry for her."

"That I can quite believe," observed Claud meaningly.

She raised her eyes to his with a look of

calm interrogation; and, in spite of himself, he admired her courage. She must have known that she was found out; but she never quailed under his gaze for an instant, and affected to notice nothing strange in his manner. Claud could not help remembering what his father had said of her sex in the morning—"Even when they can deceive you no longer, they will not give up trying."

"What about the new play?" she asked presently. "I hear the most glowing accounts of it, and a few days ago I read a long piece about it in the Paris correspondence of the *Times*. I kept the paper to send to you."

"Thank you," said Claud; "I have seen the paper; and you will soon be able to see the play, if you wish it; for we shall be in Paris within forty-eight hours."

"We?"

"Yes; you and I. We shall start the day after to-morrow."

"My dear Claud, what are you thinking of? I could not possibly be ready in time."

"I am sorry for it; because, in that case, you will have to do the impossible."

"I don't understand you," she said coldly. "I can be ready in a week, if that will do; or, if you cannot wait so long, I can follow you.

As for my starting the day after to-morrow, it is out of the question. I have to go up to London to fit on a dress; and besides, I have several engagements here."

"Then you must break your engagements and have your dress sent after you," returned Claud curtly. "I am going back to Paris the day after to-morrow, and I do not choose to leave you here any longer alone. I don't know whether you wish me to speak more plainly."

"Really I think you had better," she said. "You are taking up a very extraordinary tone."

"I suppose you understand what I mean," rejoined Claud, slowly and unwillingly. "Why do you force me into mentioning such things? Since I have been back, I have heard from more than one quarter that you have been making yourself talked about. And I am determined to put a stop to it."

That was all that came of the famous invective which he had been going to hurl at the head of the culprit. Mr. Flemyng's volubility had for once served a good purpose; and Claud, being no longer angry, was more alive to the humiliation of his position than to his wrongs.

Nina was not a whit disconcerted. "I must

say they have lost no time," she observed. "Did Miss Pennefather stop you on the Esplanade, and feel it her duty to etcetera, etcetera? Or have you received a shoal of anonymous letters?"

"Neither the one nor the other," answered Claud, shortly. "It was Mrs. Knowles who told me, what appears to be no secret, about you—and another person."

"Oh, we needn't leave the other person's name blank, as though he were the devil. Poor little Freddy!"

"Upon my word!" exclaimed Claud, "I think you might keep your pity for those who deserve it more."

"For you, do you mean? I'm sure I don't grudge it you. I should pity anybody who allowed himself to be disturbed by the gossip of spiteful old women, like Mrs. Knowles."

This was more than Claud could listen to with patience. "I don't listen to spiteful gossip," he cried. "Mrs. Knowles would have said nothing, if my father had not begged her to do so; and I suppose that his only reason for not telling me himself was that he wanted to avoid the appearance of triumphing over me—which he would have had every right to do. Spiteful gossip! why, it is the talk of the whole

place! As I was walking up here, I was actually stopped by a common fisherman——"

"Mr. Thomas Burvill, I presume."

"It was Tom Burvill, if that makes any difference."

"A notorious drunkard and poacher, who, as you know very well, has a grudge against us—for no other reason, that I am aware of, than that he destroyed some property of ours and that we didn't prosecute him for it. Well; what news had this trustworthy creature to give you?"

"Nothing but what he could vouch for upon the evidence of his own senses. He told me he had seen you and Croft—kissing each other."

It was Claud, not Nina, who blushed at the mention of this alleged indiscretion.

She laughed scornfully. "And you believe that?"

"I should be very glad to think that it was a lie," answered Claud, looking down.

"It is a lie. A wilful lie, I should think; but if you want to make excuses for your friend, you can put it that he mistook another couple for us. You don't believe me, I see."

Claud hesitated. Ought he, after all, to take a drunken fisherman's word against his wife's?

And yet in his heart he suspected that the drunken fisherman was the more to be depended upon of the two.

"Why should I believe you?" he asked at length coldly. "You have deceived me."

"Have I? That remains to be proved. Perhaps, if you had asked me a direct question, I should have given you an honest answer. Claud, I think you used to know me well enough to know at least one thing—whatever I may be, I am not a liar."

"Do you mean me to understand that you have done nothing to be ashamed of?"

"Ah, that is asking too much. I might say Yes, or I might say No—I really can't quite tell. You should put questions that one can reply to. If you had asked me whether I had ever kissed Freddy Croft, for instance, I could have answered No. If you had asked me whether he had ever kissed me, I should have said Yes. He did kiss me once—and only once."

"Oh, you admit once."

"I do. And as this occurred last autumn, and as I have seen him almost every day of his life since, and he has never attempted to repeat the offence, I think you will admit that I cannot have given him much encouragement. Perhaps

you think I ought to have written and told you about it by the first post."

"I think, at all events, that your seeing him, as you say, every day of his life since is rather strange."

Then there was an interval of silence, during which Claud several times opened his lips to speak, and as often checked himself. He began, at last, constrainedly and haltingly—

"I hardly know what to say to you—to speak plainly, I hardly know how far to believe you. I think I should be a fool to believe you. And yet I am not sure that it is not best in some cases to be a fool—or at least to appear like one. It is so much the least troublesome plan to hold one's tongue, and shut one's eyes, and drift. Still, having begun, we ought perhaps to go on—to come to some clearer understanding. I don't know whether I make myself intelligible."

"Perfectly intelligible," answered Nina, composedly. "You mean that you are an honest man in a fog; isn't that it?"

She looked him full in the face as she spoke, and her manner had a certain commiserating condescension. It was the very sublimity of impudence, if it was assumed; but I am inclined to think that it was not, and that she

really felt herself in some sense superior to him for the moment.

"You mean," she went on, "that we are in a false position, and that you would like to get out of it, if that were in any way possible. But, do you know, I can scarcely see how we are to get out of it—unless it were by the help of Sir James Hannen; and I'm afraid the case is not one for his interference."

Claud made a slight movement of irritation. "You speak as though you were not in the least to blame."

"Do I? I didn't mean to do so. I dare say I am to blame. I am heartless, good-for-nothing—what you please. But I warned you: you can't say I didn't warn you."

"Warned me of what—that you proposed to disgrace me?"

"Don't let us use ugly words—what is the good? Listen, Claud," she continued, raising herself from her recumbent attitude, and speaking with a shade more earnestness. "I will speak as openly as I can; I will conceal nothing from you; and if at the end we are as much in the dark as ever, it shall be no fault of mine. Do you remember, one day before we were married, my telling you I would never consent to a long engagement?"

Claud nodded.

"And I told you why. I tried to make you understand what I was, so that you should not marry me with your eyes shut; and always, from the very first, I had tried to make you understand, only you would not or could not. And you don't understand now; and I don't think you ever will, because you are so different from me. You are one of those people who never intentionally do the things that they ought not to have done, or leave undone the things they ought to have done; and you have a will, or a conscience, or something that enables you to resist temptation, and all that. Now, I am the exact opposite. I suppose I haven't got a will or a conscience. When I do wrong, I am perfectly well aware of it, and I go on doing it all the same. I never make good resolutions now, because I know beforehand that I shall infallibly break them. You might as well try to keep a fly out of a jar of honey as to keep me from yielding to temptation. All I can do is to warn people of what I am; and if they won't be warned, isn't it their own fault? I am what I am; I didn't create myself."

"That is an easy way of evading responsibility for one's actions," Claud could not help observing.

She shrugged her shoulders. "I told you you would not understand. When I told you that if I were left to myself, I should be sure to flirt with somebody, I was not thinking of evading responsibility; I simply meant to put you on your guard—nothing more."

"According to that, I might tell a man that, if he irritated me, I should very likely murder him, and then, if I did murder him, it would be his own fault."

"Well, I think he would be a great idiot to irritate you after such a frank caution."

She was silent for a moment or two, as if she expected him to speak; but, as he said nothing, she resumed presently :—

"I suppose it has never occurred to you that I might retaliate upon you, if I chose, or that there could possibly be anything to be said on my side of the question."

Claud sighed. "Mrs. Knowles told me that I ought not to have sent you over to England alone," he said; "but I can hardly think that you would urge that argument against me."

"Oh no. I came over to England of my own free will, of course, and remained here of my own free will. It is not that."

"What then?"

"Only that if you had cared for me a little

more, it would have made a difference. You did care for me once; but it didn't last long; and I warned you of that too. I don't blame you. I should be the last person in the world to do that; for I know you can't help yourself; but there is the fact—you don't love me any more."

Claud winced; for her shot had hit its mark. He would have given the world to be able to answer that he loved her still, but he could not. For a moment he realized, as everybody does now and then, the impotence of poor humanity, and saw clearly the relentless law of change which no mortal can fight against, and felt the miserable self-contempt of a proud man who would fain be true and cannot be true. And then, as was but natural, he tried to convince himself that if change had come, it was not by his fault, and that the evil might yet be remedied. So he harked back to an old grievance.

"Why did you go away and leave me?" he asked reproachfully.

"Why? Don't you think it may have been for that very reason?"

Honestly, he did not think so. He could not accuse himself of any diminution in his love for Nina up to the time when she had left him.

Nevertheless, he felt very near to forgiving his wife. But he remembered all that she had done, and how he was not the only one who would suffer through her selfishness, and he said to himself, "Not yet."

Then came another long silence, which Claud was the first to break. He drew a little nearer to Nina, and stood in the same attitude, resting his elbow upon the mantelpiece, and looking down upon her as she sat bending over the fire.

"Nina," he said gently, "I believe you are sorry for having caused all this trouble. I don't think you would have done it, if you had thought."

Her reply was hardly what he had expected.

"I don't think I am sorry," she said considering. "What does it matter? I am sorry that there should be such a fuss and bother; but, beyond that, I can't say that I care much."

Claud jerked himself away from the mantelpiece, and thrust his hands into his pockets, tapping with his foot and frowning in impatient incredulity.

"I can't for the life of me see what is your object in talking like that," he ejaculated. "Nobody could possibly be as heartless and selfish as you affect to be."

Nina lifted up a smiling and wondering face. "It isn't affectation," she said quietly; "it's perfectly genuine. What have I done that you should expect me to repent in sackcloth and ashes? I haven't committed any crime that I know of. I have amused myself after my fashion, and I suppose I always shall to the end of the chapter. If you will be advised by me, you will let me alone. I am not in the least likely to 'disgrace' you, as you call it, and I shall not interfere with your amusements. I haven't asked you how you have been spending all this time in Paris, have I? Some wives," she added, with a laugh, "would have been in a great state of mind at the thought that their husbands were at the theatre every day, talking to pretty actresses."

"Ah, I see it is hopeless," said Claud.

He walked away to the window, and looked out at the fading landscape, his heart full of angry despair. "The governor was right," he thought to himself, with a bitter little laugh; "matrimony is a deplorable institution."

"What are you laughing at?" asked Nina from the other end of the room.

"I am laughing," he answered, "at the results of a runaway marriage. It's a capital joke, isn't it? I am not sure but that you have the best of the laugh, though."

He returned slowly, and stood beside her again. "We have not a very cheerful prospect before us; but we must make the best of it. I have only one thing more to say: I must insist upon your going back to Paris with me the day after to-morrow."

"That I certainly shall not do," replied Nina placidly.

"Very well. Then I shall make you do it."

Claud's voice, as he uttered this threat, was not very pleasant to hear; but she was in no way moved by it.

"Oh, but that's impossible, you know," she said. "What can you do? Will you bring a fly to the door, and drag me into it by the scruff of my neck?"

"I hope you will not make it necessary for me to use force; but come you shall. You leave me no resource but to speak to your father."

"Poor old fellow! Much good that will do you! Do you think he can coerce me, if you can't? Really, Claud, you had better give in; this dispute is getting horribly vulgar."

He could not but feel that it was; and, moreover, that it was fast tending towards an anti-climax. To own himself defeated would be to abrogate his authority at once and for ever; and yet he was well aware that, if pushed to

extremities, he could not and would not carry out his menace of resorting to violence. Out of this dilemma one final chance of escape suggested itself to him. "Nina," he said, "I won't talk to you about your sense of duty or your self-respect: you have shown me that it would be a mere waste of breath to do that. But I will appeal to what I believe you do possess—good nature. You always used to claim for yourself that you were good-natured."

"My friends are pleased to consider me so."

"Well then, I will ask you to come away from this place out of good nature, since you won't allow me to put my request upon any higher grounds. If you at all realize what you are doing, you cannot be so selfish as to refuse. Just consider!—a week's gratification of your vanity, or caprice, or whatever you like to call it, against a lifetime of misery for others. In spite of all, I don't think so badly of you yet as to believe that you could hesitate, if you would only think of it."

"A lifetime of misery! Do you imagine that Freddy Croft is the sort of man to make himself miserable for a lifetime?"

"I am not speaking of Freddy Croft; I am speaking of Geneviève."

"Oh, she won't hurt; she'll get over it," returned Nina, rather brutally.

And when she spoke those words, it seemed to Claud that he saw the woman for the first time as she was. All that she had said before was as nothing, compared with this insolent cynicism, this utter disregard of the happiness which she had destroyed; and he felt that a gulf had now opened between him and his wife, across which they would never be able to join hands again. Nevertheless, he answered her calmly enough.

"You think this will not hurt her; that is natural. You judge of her by what you are yourself. But she is not like you—thank God!"

"To whomsoever the thanks may be due, she certainly is not like me. She is no more like me than you are, or than she is like Freddy Croft. It is a thousand pities that she should be your sister. If she had not been, you might have married her, and I might have married Freddy; and then everybody would have been suited. Really, if I am the means of breaking off her engagement, I shall feel that I have performed a most benevolent action, and saved her from what you would call a lifetime of misery. It's an ungrateful world; but perhaps she may live to thank me."

"She will live to curse you, as I do!" retorted Claud fiercely.

Nina got up at once. "If you are going to forget yourself in that way I had better leave you," she said.

He sprang to the door, and put his back against it. "You will leave this room when I let you out, and not a minute sooner."

Nina looked at him; and then, all of a sudden, she became frightened, She fell back, throwing up her arms instinctively, and gasping out, "Claud! Claud!——"

He saw in her face the reflection of his own, and throwing open the door, rushed from the room and out of the house, flying from he knew not what.

In the cool air and the twilight his senses soon returned to him; but he did not think of going back to the library. He wandered across the wet lawn, to the cedar-tree under which he had spent so many happy hours, and leaning against the trunk, mused over all that had come and gone in such a brief space of time. He could fancy he saw Nina again, as he had often seen her in those summer days that would never return, moving, with the lithe grace that was all her own, from sunlight to shade under the branches of the old tree there—herself an

embodiment of sunlight. It was the same Nina whom he had left just now in the library, staring at him with dilated eyes of terror—the same deceitfully candid, designedly reckless, good-naturedly selfish creature with whom he had fallen in love. But what had happened to him, or to her, that the very peculiarities which had so fascinated him a year and a half before should now move him with nothing but aversion? To such questions the answer is wanting; and so Claud confessed to himself, with an impatient sigh. All that was clear was that somewhere a fatal mistake had been made.

A cold mist was creeping up the valley with the darkness, as he walked slowly away, his head bent, and his hands clasped behind his back; the heavy air was still and silent, except for the small sound of drops of moisture falling among the evergreens; the cheerlessness of the prospect made a fit accompaniment to his melancholy reflections. "I shall have to make over my allowance to her, and live in Paris upon what I can earn," he was thinking. "I shall never be able to live with her. Poor old governor! he wasn't far wrong. Hang all women!—little shall they see of me for the rest of my days. And the worst of it is that she has beaten me—beaten me all along the

line; though Heaven knows I had the strongest positions. It wasn't a fair fight. What is one to do with a woman if she drives you to a point where words won't help you any more? Ah! if she had been a man——" And he clenched his fist involuntarily.

Now at that moment, as chance would have it, a figure suddenly loomed up out of the fog on the further side of the moat; and presently some one crossed the drawbridge with quick, brisk steps, whistling, appropriately enough, "We don't want to fight;" the ditty with which, at that time, the ears of the British public were chiefly afflicted. There was no mistaking the identity of that joyous pedestrian. Claud's heart gave a bound; for had he not here the answer to his wish? He remained motionless until the other had set foot upon the gravel, and then took two strides forward, and confronted him. Freddy started violently, and fell back a step or two, the exclamation that was upon his lips dying away when he saw Claud's face. Claud came closer to him, drawing his left fist slowly back to his shoulder. Here, at any rate, a good substitute for words was available.

But the blow was never delivered. No one has ever accused Freddy Croft of lacking

pluck; but we know the influence of a guilty conscience upon the courage, and very likely the suddenness of this encounter may have robbed him of his presence of mind At all events, he made another hasty movement of retreat, and, missing his footing, fell heavily backwards into the moat.

Claud burst out laughing. "You have saved me the trouble of knocking you down," he called out; "but I advise you to keep out of my way for the next two days, if you value your personal appearance."

And, without waiting for a reply, he crossed the bridge, and strode away, feeling a trifle relieved.

Only when he was halfway down the avenue did he remember the depth of the moat, and that it was just on the cards that his late antagonist might be badly hurt. He stopped and listened: there was not a sound to be heard. Then, rather unwillingly, he retraced his steps, thinking, "After all, the fellow may have broken his neck;" and, advancing to the brink of the moat, called out, "Hi! Croft, are you down there?"

A faint moan was the only reply.

Claud scrambled down the bank, and groping about in the darkness, found Freddy lying just as he had fallen.

"What's the matter, Croft? What have you done to yourself?" he asked, in some anxiety.

"I've broke my back, I think," answered Freddy feebly.

"Nonsense, man! get up!" returned Claud, not choosing to acknowledge his alarm even to himself.

"I can't," said Freddy, "I haven't any feeling in my legs. Just run round to the stables, like a good fellow, and tell them to bring a hurdle or something. I——"

The speaker's voice ended in a long sigh, and his head fell back.

"Good God! he's dead!" ejaculated Claud.

As the faculties of a drowning man are said to gain a supernatural grasp, and to embrace in one comprehensive flash of memory the history of a whole life, so at that moment Claud realized in all its force the awful ruin that had fallen upon him. He saw Geneviève's maiden widowhood; he saw Lady Croft's despair; he saw Croft Manor passing into the hands of the far-away next of kin; he saw himself branded for ever as a murderer, if not in the eyes of the law, at least in those of the world; and knowing what a far wider sorrow this man's death would cause than his own could have done, he longed, with a longing as intense as it was vain,

that he could only change places with him. And all this while he was tearing open Freddy's waistcoat and shirt, and thrusting his hand over the heart which was still feebly beating.

The events of the next few hours were like incidents in a horrible nightmare, which Claud cannot bear to look back upon now; yet will never be able to forget. He remembers hurrying back to the house, and that presently he was in the moat again, with a little crowd of servants and stable-helpers; and they had brought a shutter and lanterns; and Nina was there too, pale and horror-struck, and Mr. Flemyng, speechless for once. He remembers helping to carry the poor fellow indoors, and that, as soon as they had restored him to consciousness, something was said about getting him into bed; but Freddy begged so hard to be taken home that it was finally thought best not to agitate him by opposing his wish; and a waggonette was got ready, with a mattrass, on to which he was lifted. One of the men was going to saddle a horse and ride off for the doctor; but Claud, with that feverish craving to be doing something which besets most people at such times, intercepted him.

"I can run there in less time than it would take you to get a horse ready and ride," he

said; and before the man could answer him, he was off.

Claud was a swift runner, and knowing, as he did, the exact position of the doctor's house, he made straight across country for his point; and, considering that no groom was ever yet known to saddle a horse in a hurry, he did perhaps really accomplish the distance more quickly than a horseman would have done. He dashed on through the darkness, swerving at no obstacle, scrambling over hedges and ditches, breaking through fences; and reached his destination at last, breathless and exhausted, only to be informed that the doctor had not yet returned from his rounds. The stolid maid-servant who answered his ring, and who was probably too familiar with anxious messengers to be infected by his emotion, could give him no clue as to her master's whereabouts. He might be back at any moment, she said; but then again, he might not return before dinner-time. "Mostly in general, he had his dinner at seven o'clock; but sometimes it was kep' warm for him up to half-past eight. 'Tis just as may be, you see, sir," said the exasperating woman.

The end of it was that Claud paced up and down the garden in an agony of impatience for

more than an hour before the lamps of the doctor's dog-cart were seen approaching.

The doctor was an excellent little man in a large practice—a trifle rough of manner; but kind-hearted and absolutely indifferent to his own comfort in the matter of food and sleep. As soon as he had been told what had happened, he turned his tired horse. "Jump up," he said to Claud shortly; and in a few minutes they were bowling along the high-road towards Croft at a good round pace.

Not much was said on the way. One of the pair was too agitated to be capable of thought or speech upon any but a single subject; and the other, who was a man of few words, had probably perceived that he could get no information worth having out of his companion. Claud remembers that, after a time, he was sitting in the hall at Croft, waiting, like a prisoner, to receive his sentence; but how long he sat there he has no idea. There was a subdued stir and commotion going on, doors opening and shutting overhead, servants hurrying up and down stairs, exchanging strident whispers, as the habit of their class is, when an accident has occurred. Apparently, too, the house was full of visitors—people in evening dress, who crossed and re-crossed the hall, or

collected in groups, talking together in low voices and looking oddly at Claud, but never addressing him.

At length the doctor came down, and made hastily for the door. Claud started up and followed him, and as soon as they were outside—

"Well?" he asked eagerly.

The doctor had already gathered up his reins, and had one foot on the step. "I am going to send off a telegram to London," he said. "It will be a comfort to them to have the best advice."

"Can his life be saved?"

"Impossible to say: we must hope for the best. But he will never walk again."

Claud hardly took in the meaning of this announcement. His whole mind was filled with one dread—a selfish one, if you like.

"But will he live?" he persisted.

"We must hope for the best," answered the doctor again; and drove away without another word.

Claud staggered aimlessly out into the night. He felt that Freddy's doom and his own had been pronounced.

CHAPTER XI.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END.

"DEVILISH hard luck for a man, I must say, to meet with his death in that stoopid way—devilish hard! Why, over and over again, when I was afloat, I've seen a man fall clear from the top-gallant rigging, and come down on the deck—slap!—like a sack of potatoes, and be none the worse for it a month afterwards. Smashed a rib or two perhaps—something of that kind. Upon my life, I sometimes think the men of the present day ain't made of the same stuff as we were. The idea of tumbling into a bit of a ditch like that, and getting your back broke!"

"Not broken, Admiral, not broken. It is a case of severe injury to the vertebral column, I believe."

"God bless my soul! sir," cries the Admiral testily, "what the deuce does it matter whether

it's a broken back or a severe what-d'ye-call-it, so long as the poor beggar has got to die of it?"

"Not very much, certainly. But I am told that cases of that description do not by any means invariably or necessarily end fatally."

"Don't they indeed? For all that, young Croft won't last out the week, I hear. But perhaps you can give us a better report, Pender: it seems you know all about it."

"I only repeat what Dr. Soames told me," answers Mr. Pender meekly; "and I suppose you will allow that he is entitled to speak with some authority upon surgical matters."

"Don't know, I'm sure," growls the Admiral, who does not love to be corrected. "Never had him in my house, I'm thankful to say. If he don't treat his patients better than he plays whist, I'm sorry for 'em, that's all!"

"Well, well; he knows something about anatomy, I presume; and from what he tells me, there is nothing unusual in this case. He says you can't account for these things. One often hears of marvellous escapes, and in the same way it sometimes happens that a comparatively slight accident has fatal results. Soames says any one of us might have just as bad a fall to-morrow, getting down from the box of a

carriage. So it is!—in the midst of life we are in death. It is a most unfortunate business—most unfortunate in *every* way," concludes Mr. Pender, sighing heavily.

The little semicircle in the club window contracts itself; grey heads approach one another, and are wagged solemnly; looks full of profound meaning are interchanged.

"I'm sorry for Flemyng; I will say that. He's a man whom I don't like; but I'm sorry for him," calls out the Admiral magnanimously.

General Blair is understood to second the motion.

"Ah, yes, indeed!" chimes in the lugubrious voice of Mr. Pender. "When such affliction comes into a man's home, one would be very unwilling to appear hard upon him; but I must confess—— However, least said, soonest mended."

"Some men would sell their souls to have a baronet popping in and out of their house at all hours," the Admiral is constrained to observe, after a manful effort to keep silence.

Whereupon Mr. Pender shuts his mouth with a virtuous and inflexible air, and looks out to sea. Presently he remarks that the glass is falling, and that he shouldn't wonder if there was snow about.

"Did anybody see the accident happen?" inquires one of the group, who is not so well up in matters of local interest as some of our friends.

"Oh, dear me, yes," answers Mr. Pender, in a low, sad voice. "That is the worst of it. It was young Gervis who came in, and told them what had happened. I am afraid there can be no doubt that there was a scuffle. I don't think there has been any attempt made to disguise that."

"Oh, young Gervis? Didn't I hear some talk about an affair between his wife and poor Croft?" asks the ill-informed one.

"God bless my soul, man! why, it has been the scandal of the county for the last three months!" cries the Admiral. "There's no hushing up a thing like that."

"I fear not—I fear not," Mr. Pender agrees. And he adds, with manifest reluctance, "There is nothing I dislike so much as talking about matters which do not concern me; but I fancy that, before very long, you will hear some things that will surprise you."

"What things? What d'ye mean?" asks the Admiral greedily.

But a profound sigh is Mr. Pender's sole response.

"They'll have an inquest, of course," pipes out General Blair.

"Oh, I hope not, General. I hope that may be avoided."

"Eh?—avoid it? Can't avoid it. Can't do without an inquest. Must have an inquest," says the General, in a tone of cheery anticipation.

"I think you will find that that is a point left to the discretion of the coroner," answers Mr. Pender, who, by the way, somewhat resembles the typical coroner himself in appearance, and is evidently well acquainted with the duties of that functionary. "You see," he continues judicially, "this cannot be considered exactly a case of sudden death. I should hardly think—I won't speak too positively—but I should *hardly* think that an inquiry would be called for in the present instance. Of course, if death had resulted immediately, the case would have been different."

"What!" roars the Admiral, "do you mean to tell me that, if I fall downstairs and break my neck, I am liable to have a dashed coroner prying into my house, and intruding upon my wife and family, and pulling my corpse about?" The Admiral turns quite purple at the bare notion of this imaginary profanation. "I should

like to catch him at it! He'd go out a deuced deal quicker than he came in, I can tell him!" shouts the indignant officer.

"Well, you know, Admiral, you would hardly be in a position to offer resistance under such circumstances," observes Mr. Pender, with a grim chuckle.

"They say that poor girl is terribly cut up," the Admiral remarks, after a pause.

"Miss Gervis, do you mean? Ah, yes; and well she may be!—well she may be!" says Mr. Pender. "I have always thought she was the best of the family; but I am afraid those Gervises are a bad lot."

"A deuced unlucky lot, it seems to me," observes the Admiral more charitably.

"That may be; but it is a question whether a man has a right to call the natural consequences of his actions unlucky. The moment I heard that the young people had been sent over from France post-haste, I said to Mrs. Pender, 'You may be sure the whole truth has come out at last.' No, Admiral, I would rather not say any more, if you'll excuse me. You will hear all about it in good time, I have no doubt."

"A man who makes mysteries," the Admiral begins in his most emphatic tones. But the remainder of his speech cannot be recorded;

for at this juncture, the reporter of the above remarks, who had arrived in Beachborough the night before, laid down the newspaper which he had not been reading, and left the room.

They did not mean to be ill-natured, those talkative veterans. A catastrophe was in some sort a godsend to them, as varying the monotony of their purposeless lives, and it was hardly to be expected that they should refrain from discussing and secretly enjoying this one a little. As the news of a birth or a marriage stirs the sympathies of all women, so that of a death would appear to have a special attractiveness for old men. And indeed the subject is one in which they may well be excused for feeling something of a personal interest. Yet a little while and the Admiral and Mr. Pender will be pronouncing their funeral oration over General Blair ; and again a little while, and the melancholy Pender—we will say—will be left to deplore the consequence of his poor friend Bagshawe's imprudent indulgence in port wine. Nay, there is every reason to suppose that, sooner or later, the humble writer and the benevolent reader of these pages will be spoken of in the past tense at their respective clubs, and their several virtues and failings, their debts or their legacies, descanted upon in no

broken-hearted accents. Those Beachborough cronies would have been very much surprised if they had been accused of heartlessness. Had they not openly declared their sorrow at the occurrences under consideration? Had they even committed themselves to a positive assertion that the various reports flying about were true? They did but repeat what they had been told; and their opinion of Freddy's hopeless state was, unhappily, only that of the posse of doctors and surgeons who had flocked together from Lynchester, Beachborough, and the whole country-side to meet round his bed. A great man was summoned from London, and, after spending some hours at Croft, returned, taking with him a cheque proportionate to his greatness; but he could say little to console the distracted lady who entreated and almost commanded him to save her son. He was a shade less despondent—or less plain-spoken—than his provincial brethren; apprehended no immediate danger; and had even known of a few cases in which the use of the limbs had been recovered, after a similar accident. He did not, however, profess to have discovered any hopeful symptoms in the condition of his present patient; and upon the subject of treatment and remedies he was ominously silent.

Freddy himself had been convinced from the first that he was beyond help of these. He bore his sufferings, which were very severe at times, like a man ; only once or twice expressing a hope that they would not last long. The poor fellow did not want to live ; nor in truth could life be greatly desired for him. Some cripples there are for whom existence has yet its pleasures ; but no one could suppose that Freddy Croft was likely to prove one of them ; and indeed all those about him could not but echo the wish that his time might be short.

All, that is to say, with one notable exception. On the second day after the catastrophe, Freddy called his mother, and begged her to go over to Southlands, and bring back Geneviève with her.

"I have behaved like a scoundrel to her," he said ; "but I don't think she'll refuse to come and say good-bye to me."

So Lady Croft went ; and, it is needless to say, met with no hindrance in the execution of her task. In the carriage she endeavoured, through her tears and sobs, to prepare Geneviève in some measure for the revelation which she knew that her son would make ; but the girl, who was quite composed, interrupted her.

"Claud has told me all about it," she said. "We need not speak of it now."

The poor lady began to stammer out some incoherent pleas in extenuation, blaming "the woman," blaming Mr. Gervis, blaming everybody except the unhappy culprit, who would so soon be beyond the reach of either blame or pardon.

"Dear Lady Croft," said Geneviève gently, "do not make excuses for him; they are not needed. He was never really engaged to me, you know; and even though he had been, it would have made no difference. I should not have cared for him at all if I could not forgive him anything and everything."

"It is in the blood, my dear; they are all the same, and always have been; they cannot help themselves. If you knew how good he has been all this year, and how he has changed his habits!—and all for your sake. But now there is an end of everything."

"No, there is not," answered the girl firmly. "He will not die; he will recover, and walk again as well as ever. I have felt certain of it from the very beginning."

Lady Croft shook her head, and buried her face in her handkerchief. But Geneviève repeated her conviction.

"He will get well; I know he will. You will see. And supposing that I am wrong, we shall be none the worse off for having hoped while there was still hope. But I am not wrong. I am as sure that we shall save him as that I am sitting here."

And from this opinion nothing availed to move her, then or afterwards. Her hopefulness did, in the sequel, prove to be some comfort and support to Lady Croft, who was only too willing to grasp at straws; but to others, who knew that this inability to believe the worst is no uncommon phenomenon, it was very distressing.

What pleased Geneviève was the tacit acknowledgment on the part of the whole household at Croft of her right to be there. Lady Croft had begged her to stay for a week—or longer; and, perfectly understanding what was implied in that indefinite limit, she could hardly have refused, even had she wished to do so. But at the same time it had been clear to her that her position in the house would be an equivocal, and might easily be made a very uncomfortable one; and therefore it was a relief to her mind to be received and treated in all respects as one of the family. Lady Croft took her, with as little delay as possible, to the

room where Freddy was lying; and his sister, who had been sitting by the bedside, got up at once, and left the two together.

The meeting could not be otherwise than a painful one; and there was much to make it so besides the conviction which one of them at least felt that it was very nearly their last meeting on earth; but Geneviève had thought of all that, and had made up her mind as to the course she should adopt. It must have cost her an effort to sit down in the chair just vacated by Miss Croft, and to talk cheerfully of the day when they had parted in the Bois, as though all the subsequent sorrows that had fallen upon them could be ignored; but she did it; and if her treatment of the situation astonished Freddy a good deal, it undoubtedly had the desired effect of calming him, and reducing the state of feverish excitement in which he had been all day. When he began, in a weak, trembling voice, to make his confession, she stopped him with an uplifted hand.

"That is all over and done with," she said, "and you must never trouble yourself with thinking of it again. It does not trouble me, because I know you love me best——"

"I was sure you would!" he cried eagerly, his hot hand grasping hers. "I have been an

awful fool, and worse than a fool—nothing is too bad for me; but I never for one moment was untrue to you in my heart. I have been utterly miserable ever since the beginning of it; and I never thought—I never intended—I hoped, you know, I should be able to break with it all; only, I couldn't somehow—and old Knowles told me—and I was very unhappy about it; but——"

"I know," she answered, smiling at him. "I can quite understand. Don't you remember that evening of the ball at Southlands, and my telling you that nothing would make any difference in me, not even your loving some one else, if that were to come? So you see, a thing of this kind, which was not your fault at all, is not worth our remembering, and we won't remember it. A great deal too much has been made of it already."

"How generous you are!" he cried, with moist eyes. "There is no one like you in the world."

"It is not generous to understand the truth," she said. "But if there were occasion for it, I could be generous—to you."

And I dare say she was thinking of some one else, to whom it would not be quite so easy to show generosity, and whose trespasses she

could hardly yet say to herself that she had forgiven.

"There is no one like you," he repeated. "I wonder what could ever have made you care for such a fellow as I am!" And then, after a brief silence, "I suppose you didn't bring the violin with you?"

"Yes, I did. Your mother was a little shocked, I think, when she saw them put it into the carriage; but she said nothing, nor did I, because I knew she would not understand. But I remembered that you used to like to hear me play."

"You think of everything!" he exclaimed gratefully. "Poor old mother! she sits here, with her Bible on her knee, and a face as long as your arm, and I can't say a word to comfort her. There's no use in pulling a long face, is there? She thinks it awful of a man on his death-bed to go on as I do; but if it ain't wrong to laugh in the beginning of your life, I can't see why it should be wrong to laugh at the end of it. Yesterday I horrified her by getting Florry to read out a bit of 'Soapy Spunge' to me. Do you recollect where old Soapy Spunge says he'll make 'em cry 'capivvy!'? That always used to make me roar. 'Capivvy,' don't you know, instead of *peccavi*—ha, ha, ha!"

It was the ghost of poor Freddy's jolly laugh; but Geneviève forced herself to join in it. She had never heard of the work to which he alluded, and would not, perhaps, under any circumstances have relished the quotations which he continued to give from it to the full extent that he did; but she encouraged him, and laughed with him, reminding him of old jokes and old days; so that, in less than an hour, he felt and spoke more like himself than he had done for months.

"It's no use pulling a long face, is it?" he said again. But as the words passed his lips a sudden spasm contracted his own.

"Are you in pain, dear?" asked Geneviève, bending over him.

"No—not much, at least—that's nothing. But—but it's so hard to leave you, Gen."

"You are not going to leave me," she whispered. "You are going to stay with me for years and years, I hope."

He shook his head. "It's all up with me; the doctors as good as told me so. I don't complain. I had a jolly life while it lasted, and we must all die some day. It's only——"

"Yes, I know. And you must remember me. You must try to live for my sake."

"Ah, if trying would do any good!——"

He did not tell her that he felt his strength decreasing, slowly but surely, with every hour. True to his life-long maxim of making the best of things, he was anxious to maintain a cheerful demeanour as long as he should be able to manage it. He affected even to be partly convinced by her sanguine prognostications; and possibly also the thought of saying farewell may have made him distrust his courage a little.

After some time, Geneviève said, "Freddy, I have a favour to ask of you."

"Then you know beforehand that it is granted."

"It is about Claud. He is so dreadfully unhappy. I don't think he has slept at all, and he has hardly eaten anything since—since that evening. He says he can never forgive himself; but I want you to see him, and say you forgive him."

"Forgive him? Poor, dear old boy!—what for? He hadn't anything to do with this."

"He thinks he had."

"Rubbish! I started back when I saw him, and I forgot about the moat, and down I went. That was how it happened. It was no more his fault than it would have been if my horse had shied at him and pitched me off. And if it

came to forgiving, you know—— But we won't talk about that. Where is he? Is he here?"

"I don't know; but I think very likely he is not far off. He hangs about all day long, asking for news of you when he can get a chance; but he does not like to come into the house."

"I never heard of such a thing! I must have him up at once. Would you mind ringing the bell, and sending somebody to look for him?"

But Geneviève said she would rather go herself. She slipped downstairs and out of the house, unnoticed: and presently, sure enough, she came upon her brother, wandering dejectedly about the deserted cricket-ground.

"Come in; he wants you," she said, touching him upon the shoulder; and he turned, and followed her, without replying.

He was in truth inconsolable; and Geneviève had made a mistake in supposing that the assurance of Freddy's pardon could go to the root of his grief. Of that he had felt tolerably secure in advance; for remorse had not so blinded him but that he could perceive that no reasonable man would dream of holding him responsible for what had happened; but the fact remained that he would have to bear the burden and consequences of guilt, and that

through him more than one life must be rendered desolate.

"If you mean that a jury would not find me guilty of manslaughter, I agree with you," he said afterwards in Freddy's room, where Geneviève had judiciously abstained from entering with him; "but that is cold comfort." And again: "Put it in what way you will, it all comes round to this—I did it. Suppose your gun had gone off out shooting, and killed me; would you not have reproached yourself, even though it had been the purest accident? And what I did was not pure accident."

He knew that, for the sake of the poor fellow who was lying helpless there, he ought to make some effort to disguise his own misery; but the task was too hard a one for him. He was exhausted by want of sleep, want of food, and the persistent torment of a fixed idea; and it was only with difficulty that he could open his lips at all. Nor was he able to delude himself with a shadow of the hope which buoyed up his sister. He had noticed immediately the pinched, grey look that had come over Freddy's features, and his heart had died within him at the sight. It was a great relief to him when Geneviève looked in at the door, and he could feel free to go away and hide his despair.

But as he got up, Freddy plucked him nervously by the sleeve. "Look here, old fellow; there's one thing I wanted to say to you. I know I've no right to interfere; but it's on my mind. About your wife, I mean. I wanted to tell you that you needn't worry yourself about —about her and me. It was all nonsense and make-believe. And I say, Claud, old chap, don't be too hard upon her. I saw, plain enough, from the first day, that pique was at the bottom of it all," continued this sagacious observer, with one of those innocently knowing looks which had sometimes made Claud smile in days of yore. "She said you were too good for her, and that you didn't care a bit about her —and that. Gen has forgiven me; don't you think you might forgive her? There! I won't say any more. I thought I'd just mention it, and you won't take it as impertinence, I hope— coming from a dying man, you know."

Claud said he certainly would not take it in that way, and, shaking hands with his friend, bade him good-night.

"You'll come again, won't you?" the latter called after him.

"Yes," he answered; "I shall be at hand whenever you want me." And so departed.

Truth to tell, he had hardly given a thought

to Nina since he had left her: the great care that weighed upon his mind had swallowed up all lesser ones. But now, as he walked across the park towards the inn where he had left his horse—for he had shrunk from showing himself to the servants at Croft—he remembered that she also must surely be in sore trouble, and what Freddy had said softened him towards her. He took the explanation he had received for what it was worth. Nothing could explain away Nina's conduct, or her own candid admissions; but what was the good of quarrelling in a world where half the wrong that is done is done unwittingly, and where the guilty and the innocent are confused in a jumble of rewards and punishments to which no man can hope to find the clue? What had made him so furious lately seemed but a small matter now; and pardon was, after all, an easy boon to grant—if that were likely to be of any use.

While his mind was thus feebly groping among the outworks of a melancholy wisdom, his body had been obediently performing its allotted duty, and had brought him to the monstrous and costly iron gates which were set up in the time of the late Sir Montagu Croft. He passed through these, and turning on the high-road, found himself suddenly face to face with

Nina—Nina, advancing with a slow and listless step, her face pale and drawn, and—oh, portent! —her hat unbecomingly pushed back from her forehead. She had driven over from the Moated House, and had left her pony-chaise in the village, as he had left his horse, being actuated, doubtless, by similar motives. If Claud had not been predisposed towards leniency, her bearing must yet have mollified him. Approaching her, he gave her, without preface, the latest news of the sufferer's condition; and presently they turned, and walked away, side by side, half reconciled already by their common sorrow and remorse.

Claud was ready to hold out the olive-branch, but he was a little puzzled how to begin; and it was Nina who spoke first.

"I suppose," said she, looking down upon the ground, "there is no good in my saying I am sorry."

"There is good, if you mean it," answered Claud, quickly.

But to this she made no rejoinder; and how was he to tell whether it was shame or pride that kept her silent? After all, this pardoning process was not quite so easy as it had looked from a distance. To forgive is one thing; but how many men or women are there magnani-

mous enough to forgive graciously? I fear that Claud was not one of that select few. All he could find to say, after long cogitation—and I am bound to confess that he did not say it in a very pleasant voice—was—

"What is done is done. Let us agree to pass a sponge over the past."

She looked up timidly. "It is so much the best way!"

Without doubt it was the best way; and yet, perhaps, she ought hardly to have said so. However, Claud extended his hand, and she took it; and after that fashion peace was signed. They were both glad to leave the subject.

Now, although matters had thus been smoothed over between the husband and wife, they not only continued to inhabit separate houses—which, under the circumstances, could hardly have been avoided—but manifested no special eagerness to see more of one another. They met, to be sure, every day, at the same place, outside the gates of Croft Manor; but their meetings were not prearranged, and during those interviews, which seldom lasted long, they spoke exclusively of Freddy's health. Nina never went beyond the lodge; but Claud was in the sick-room for an hour or more daily, and gave a curious account of what went on there. "He

has had all sorts of people to see him. Old Colonel Finch came down the other day, and is staying in the house now. Sometimes there are three or four men in the room at once, chatting about racing prospects, just as if he would be out again next season; and he seems to enjoy it, poor fellow! But what he likes best of all is to get Gen to play the violin to him. Yesterday he made her give him the instrument, and show him how to play a scale; and he scraped away, lying on his back there, and they laughed like a couple of children. No one would suppose that he was near death; and yet I know he thinks he is himself, and I fancy I can detect a shade of difference in him every day."

One afternoon, Claud had a piece of intelligence to communicate, which astonished his wife not a little. "Freddy and Gen are going to be married."

She did not understand him. "I am afraid that will never be," she said.

"It is going to be. The marriage is to take place immediately."

"Where?—in his room, do you mean?"

"Yes. He has taken it very strongly into his head; and I believe Lady Croft wishes it too. Of course, no one can object. They have

got a special license; and the ceremony is to be performed the day after to-morrow, unless—it should be necessary to perform it sooner."

Nina did not speak for a few minutes. "Poor things!" she sighed at last; "it is an odd fancy."

"Do you think so? I can understand that he should wish her to bear his name after he is gone: the wish does not seem to me an unnatural one. But I confess that I dread the scene. There are a number of people whom he wants to be present. The governor is coming, and Mr. Knowles, who drove over from Beachborough yesterday to see him. And he wished me," added Claud, in a somewhat altered voice, "to ask you if you would come too."

Nina flushed. "Oh, I would so much rather not!" she exclaimed. "That is, I will be there, of course, if you think he really wishes it, or that it would look unkind to stay away; but it would be dreadful to have to face them all."

"You can do exactly as you like," Claud said, not very cordially.

"Then I won't go. It would be rather—bad taste if I did; don't you think so?"

Claud made no answer.

"I am sure it would," she said.

Nevertheless, when the day came, she changed her mind—having, I should imagine, balanced good taste against a combination of benevolence and feminine curiosity, and found that the former consideration kicked the beam—and it struck me that her presence pleased poor Freddy more than it did her husband.

Mr. Gervis was kind enough to offer me a lift over to Croft in his brougham, and he was so exceedingly cynical and unfeeling in his remarks by the way, that I felt sure he had some genuine emotion to conceal. He began by observing that he should sincerely regret poor young Croft as an individual; but that as a son-in-law he should feel resigned to the loss of him.

"For I need not point out to you," said he, with a sidelong glance at me, "that he would infallibly have caused us all an immensity of annoyance by-and-by. In the nature of things, he would have developed one form of vice or another; and, so far as I am able to understand my daughter, she is not the sort of person to take a calm, philosophical view of vice. I look upon this," he went on, "as a truly providential dispensation—or shall we say a real stroke of good luck?—for Geneviève. For several years

she will be able to indulge in the luxury of grief; and then, when she marries again, and has to undergo all the abominable plagues which are inseparable from married life, she will always be able to fall back upon the happy memory of having once belonged to a faultless being. It is not to every one that these mercies are vouchsafed."

The old gentleman's face, when he encountered his daughter-in-law in the hall, was a study. I fancy that, if ever he had felt a strong dislike in his life, it was for Mrs. Nina that he had reserved that sentiment; but in the suave courtesy of his greeting, and in the solicitude with which he trusted that her health had not suffered from all these agitations, there was but so faint a spice of irony that I should have been very sorry to swear to its existence. In the whole course of my acquaintance with him, I can only remember once to have heard him say a downright ill-natured thing of anybody; and that was of Lady Croft, who came to the top of the staircase to meet us, sobbing hysterically.

"Who was that woman before she married?" he whispered to me, as we followed her along the corridor. And when I told him—"An old family?" he inquired. I said she had been

an heiress, and that I believed her father had made his fortune by the invention of some patent drug.

"Ah! so I should have supposed," he remarked. "That obstreperous grief *sent sa canaille d'une lieue.*"

For my own part, I confess that I was in some danger of falling under the ban of Mr. Gervis's displeasure and forfeiting my title to gentility; and that not so much from the sight of the unfortunate mother's distress, as from the enforced cheerfulness of the rest of the party, whom we presently joined. Colonel Finch was rubbing his hands and talking very fast to Miss Croft; Claud was turning over the leaves of a Prayer-book with trembling fingers, pointing out the responses in the service for the solemnization of matrimony to Freddy, and cautioning him in a nervously jocular manner against answering at the wrong time; the bride, pale as a ghost, but with a determined smile upon her lips, was standing beside him. The strain was too great, and I feared lest at any moment it should end in a general break down. We were the last to enter the room; and the ceremony was immediately proceeded with—which I was thankful for.

It was soon over; for the clergyman merci-

fully omitted the greater part of that marriage service which is not, according to my humble notions, a very beautiful or impressive rite at the best of times, and which he must have felt as we all did, to be painfully inappropriate to the circumstances of the case. Standing by the bedside in his white surplice, and reading in a low, murmuring voice, he had more the appearance of administering the viaticum than of pronouncing the Church's blessing upon the union of a young couple; and I dare say he was as glad to shut up his book, and get away, as we were to be relieved of his presence.

After the register had been duly signed there came a moment of embarrassment. Custom has provided us with certain useful, meaningless phrases which rise naturally to our lips when the common incidents of life call upon us to congratulate or condole with our fellow-creatures; but it is only persons of quick wits and exceptional presence of mind who can rise to the level of an extraordinary emergency; and I suppose that none of us answered to that description; for we stood looking at one another uncomfortably and not speaking a word. At length Freddy's weak voice made itself heard.

"I should like to say good-bye to you fellows

before you go. The chances are I shan't have another opportunity."

So each of us in turn bent over him, and shook him by the hand. I believe I said something stupid about "while there's life there's hope," and "see you again soon, old fellow." I ought, of course, to have held my peace, and I had no sooner spoken than I knew it; but ah, dear me! how many times in my life have I had to make the same confession, and to feel the same humiliating disgust with myself? The only comfort is that my utterances cannot be of much importance to anybody, and that probably those who hear them forget them long before I do. Directly after I had said this senseless thing, I looked round apprehensively for Mr. Gervis; but he had already vanished. He confided to me afterwards that he thought these solemn leave-takings were in the worst possible taste; and whether, as he implied, this had been his reason for leaving the room, or whether he had felt some faint distrust of his own powers of self-command, I am unable to say.

The truth is that Freddy's leave-taking was anything but solemn. To some natures it is not given to perceive the sadder and more serious aspects of life, and I know not what

should make them view its close with other eyes, unless it be fear—to which our brave little man had always been a stranger. Lady Croft, I am afraid, did not think the scene a very edifying one; but to my mind there was nothing shocking in it; and I can only hope that when my own turn comes, I may be able to meet friend Death with as cheerful and composed a countenance.

Freddy had signed his will at the same time as the register, and it appeared that he had made a few small bequests to some of us who were present.

"I've left you the brown cob, Colonel," he said to old Finch, who was leaning over the rail at the foot of the bed. "You know the one you used to ride to the meets sometimes. Just what you want for the Park in the mornings. Give him plenty of exercise, and you'll be all right on him; but don't keep him too long in the stable, or he'll be bucking you over his head in the middle of Rotten Row one of these fine days. Doctor, I've left you a horse too. I don't know whether you remember him—that flea-bitten grey that used to belong to Lynchester. You'll find him a little awkward at starting; but that don't matter in a two-wheeled trap. Keep on turning him round,

and he'll make up his mind after a bit; and once he's off, he'll go as quiet as a sheep."

So he went on with the list, his voice growing gradually weaker, and the pauses becoming longer between each sentence. At last he said: "There's only one thing more. I want you all to listen to this. There's been a lot of talk, I hear, about how I came to smash myself up; and some people say one thing and some another; so I may just as well put it right before I go. It was the sort of thing that wouldn't happen once in a hundred times, I suppose; and yet there wasn't anything very extraordinary about it. I was standing talking to Claud there, and it was in the dark, you know; and I took a step back, quite forgetting that I was upon the edge of the moat; and so I fell. So now you know all about it; and that's the whole truth, and——"

"No," interrupted Claud suddenly, in a hollow voice which made us all start; "it is not the whole truth. Why should we disguise what every one suspects? It was I who killed him."

"Hold your tongue, you idiot!" eagerly whispered some one whose zeal for the welfare of mankind has sometimes been miscalled officiousness. For the fact was I remembered what those horrible old men had said about an

inquest; and besides, how could any good purpose be served by letting strangers into the secret of bygone family dissensions?

But my intervention came a little late. Claud had said all that he intended to say, and now walked away to the window, and stood there, resting his forehead against the glass.

"He kill me!" cried Freddy, with a feeble laugh; "that's a good joke. What? Claud Gervis—the best friend I have in the world. You don't believe that, I should hope. However, I'll take my oath, if you like, that he never laid a hand upon me." And then, perceiving that Claud had moved out of sight, he raised his finger to his forehead. "Poor old boy!" he whispered; "all this has upset him; he don't know what he's talking about. Now, if you don't mind, I think I should like to be left to myself for a bit. I'm beginning to feel rather done, and I expect I'd better try and do a turn of sleep."

Just as we were leaving the room, I heard Geneviève call to the doctor, "Will you come here, please? I think he has fainted."

Had he fainted? Colonel Finch, who took my arm to walk down the corridor, explaining that he felt a touch of the gout coming on, was not of that opinion.

"It's all over—all over—what? Poor young fellow! To be taken like that, when such useless old men as you and I are left to encumber the earth—encumber the earth. I'd have given half I possess sooner than this should have happened. I would indeed—what?"

The worthy Colonel had to withdraw his arm from mine in order to blow his nose loudly; and perhaps I was not sorry to have a hand free for the same purpose. Mr. Gervis would have driven me back to Beachborough, but I said I preferred to walk; and in truth I don't think I could have borne his society at that especial moment.

CHAPTER XII.

THE END.

I HAVE always thought that it was much too bad of Freddy, after harrowing our feelings in the manner just described, to get perfectly strong and well again; and I can never remember my twelve-mile tramp from Croft to Beachborough without burning indignation. It is, however, only fair to him to say that he himself was very properly and thoroughly ashamed of his conduct in this matter. One of his first acts, after it had become evident to him that he really was not going to die, was to send the flea-bitten grey over to Dr. Soames's stable; the brown cob was, in a like becoming spirit, despatched by train to Colonel Finch; while to Mr. Gervis he made the only amends in his power, in the shape of a handsome letter of apology for having married his daughter upon false pretences. That gentleman did not fail to

point out to him by return of post that such an expression of regret, if insincere, was discreditable, and, if genuine, in the last degree uncomplimentary to the lady; adding a hope that, if Geneviève should ever see reason to concur in it, she would profit by past experience, and engage her husband in exciting conversation upon the brink of a precipice, not a mere ditch—which last was obviously not to be relied upon as an antidote to the ills of matrimony.

But all this took place long afterwards, when Geneviève had been Lady Croft for more than eighteen months; for it need hardly be said that Freddy did not recover in a day. For many weeks his life hung by a thread. He grew better, and worse, and better again, and the doctors had a grand time of it with him; but no one, except Geneviève, expected that he would ever leave the house alive—much less that he would handle a cricket-bat again, as I saw him doing, only the other day, in a highly effective manner. It was Geneviève, he declares, who saved his life. "My poor old mother," says he, "would have wept me into my grave in a week, don't you know; but Gen stuck to it that I was to get all right, and after a time I said to myself, 'Hang it all! it ain't quite the fair thing to let her go on whipping and spurring like this

without making a kick for it.' And so I began to pull myself together."

This view, it may be added, is fully shared by the Dowager, whose love and admiration for Geneviève are unbounded: so much so that experienced persons, after listening to her rhapsodies, are wont to shake their heads, remarking that so much enthusiasm is contrary to the nature of mothers-in-law, and portends a speedy reaction. It is, however, gratifying to be able to state that, to the best of my belief, no coolness has arisen between the two ladies up to the present time of writing.

Now, whether our friend's restoration to health was due to his having "made an effort," after the fashion vainly urged upon her by the relatives of the late Mrs. Dombey, or to his fine constitution, or to the fact that his spine was not as badly injured as had at first been supposed, I shall not pretend to determine; but certain it is that before the spring was far advanced, it was found possible to move him from one room to another upon a wheeled couch, and, shortly afterwards, to take him into the open air for an hour or two every day. This was a great point gained; but it by no means satisfied the aspirations of Geneviève. He was still supposed to be dying, though

taking a somewhat unreasonable time over it; and as the days went on, she formed a decided opinion that he would never be permitted to be convalescent until he should have been removed from his present surroundings. Therefore, when the summer came, she resolved upon taking a bold step. She carried him off *vî et armis* to the German baths, despite the protestations of the Dowager and the reluctant consent of the doctor, and ere long was able to send home a triumphant report of the invalid's progress.

They spent the next winter at Vienna, under the supervision of a famous specialist, whose name it is not prudent to mention in the hearing of Dr. Soames, but whose treatment, to all appearances, achieved a result which his English *confrères* had declared to be all but impossible. Soames will not allow this at all. To begin with, he denies having ever used the word "impossible;" secondly, his diagnosis of the case abundantly proves to all unprejudiced persons that in his judgment there was room for hope from the first; thirdly and lastly, he is prepared to prove, in the clearest possible manner, that the German fellow's course of procedure was utterly irrational. Now, without going quite the same length as Admiral

Bagshawe, who roundly asserts that doctors are "a dashed pack of quacks and swindlers, the whole lot of 'em," I will yet venture—being in fairly good health at the present time—to observe that I have found so much diversity of opinion in the ranks of their admirable profession that I should hesitate to accept the decision of any half-dozen of them as absolutely final; and I must say that, whatever their private views may have been, they certainly contrived to convey to my mind, and to those of others, the impression that Freddy Croft was a doomed man. Otherwise I should hardly have taken the fatiguing and most unpleasant walk to which I have alluded. However, he is out of their hands now; so it does not greatly signify. The important thing is that, during the second summer after his accident, he was walking about the alleys of Franzensbad without even the aid of a crutch or a stick. Then it was that he thought fit to send his tardy apology to Mr. Gervis, who was staying at Southlands at the time, and who was kind enough to show me both the letter in question and the reply which he had written to it.

Mr. Gervis is not much at Southlands nowadays. He comes down every now and again, and remains for a week or so; but he has taken

a small house in London, which he has heated by means of hot-water pipes to a temperature like that of a conservatory, and which, I believe, he considers his home—so far as he can be said to have a home at all. For the wandering habits of so many years have not forsaken him in his old age, and whenever he appears in Beachborough one may be pretty sure that the white sails of the *Siren* will be seen rounding the pier-heads before long.

Ponetzky died at Nice within a few months of his resumption of his true name and title; and it must be recorded to the credit of the Princess that she took up her abode with him during his last illness, and surrounded him with all the comforts that money could procure. Through her he bequeathed to Geneviève what I dare say was the only possession of any value that he had in the world, a very large and beautiful turquoise, which she has had set in a ring, and always wears. Immediately after the news of his death reached England, Mr. Gervis started upon a journey of which the end and object have never transpired; though a chain of circumstantial evidence leads me to suspect strongly that it terminated in the South of France. The reader will scarcely be surprised to hear that he has not resumed the matrimonial

collar which for so long a time galled his withers; but, knowing what I do—or, to speak more honestly, knowing as little as I do—of the man, I should be sorry to affirm that he did not offer to perform this act of self-sacrifice. If he indeed did so, Varinka probably had the good sense to decline the generous proposition.

Varinka has returned to Paris, and is once more domiciled in the Boulevard Malesherbes, having doubtless discovered that General Karakoff's inconsiderate behaviour has not robbed her of any of her friends, and that the world is, after all, inhabited by a race full of forgiveness and charity, at least towards those who have plenty of money in their pockets. As the Princess appears to have an unlimited supply of this essential blessing, it may be presumed that her visit to St. Petersburg ended satisfactorily. She entertains as liberally as of old; and I understand that a stream of light is often to be seen issuing from the windows of the little room at the end of her suite during the small hours of the morning. It would not astonish me to hear of her having been led to the altar a fourth time; for she is rich and pretty, and still charmingly youthful in appearance, and she is one of those people who never know when they are well off.

Mr. Gervis does not fail to call in the Boulevard Malesherbes whenever he is in Paris; and Claud tells me that his father and the Princess are the best of friends, and that incidents of bygone years are frequently referred to by both of them, without the smallest embarrassment on either side.

"It is astonishing," Mr. Gervis remarked one day to my grandmother, "what an entertaining and agreeable creature a woman can be, so long as you know that you can get away from her as soon as you please. Women, my dear Mrs. Knowles, are like this delightful fire of yours, comforting to sit beside, pleasant to look upon;—but we have all heard of the painful process by which *pâté de foie gras* is made. My dear madam, do you not pity the poor goose who voluntarily lets himself be tied down in a position from which he cannot escape, and exposes his liver to the certainty of destruction?"

It is not, however, for the sake of chatting with the fascinating Varinka that Mr. Gervis pays such constant visits to the French capital, but to see his son, who lives there, and who would fain induce him to occupy a room which was set apart for his especial use long ago. But Mr. Gervis has always declined to take

advantage of this hospitality. He prefers, he says, the independence of an hotel; but perhaps, if the truth were known, he does not care to live under the same roof with Nina; for that lady, despite her confident boast of former days, has not yet succeeded in making a conquest of him.

Claud has become one of those whose privilege it is *monstrari digito prætereuntium*. He has earned a high reputation, not only as a writer of plays, but also as an essayist, and has thus gained two separate circles of Parisian admirers; for I imagine that those who appreciate him in the one capacity have little knowledge of his merits as regards the other. He is always busy; he has a large and heterogeneous acquaintance, and he keeps up an establishment in the neighbourhood of the Champs Elysées, the cost of which must figure for a respectable sum in his father's banking account. There is, indeed, no longer any reason for Mr. Gervis to be otherwise than generous in his dealings with him; and, as a matter of fact, the young people live at a rate far higher than Claud's literary earnings could possibly warrant. During the summer they usually spend three or four months at Southlands, the owner of the house being commonly

absent at that season. Their frequent entertainments, and their readiness to take a share in all local burdens, whether of a charitable or hospitable kind, have secured them a widespread popularity; but, for that matter, Mrs. Gervis is popular everywhere, in France and in England alike. She is, I should fancy, a perfectly contented woman. She is at liberty to employ the most expensive dressmakers, and avails herself of her prerogative; she goes a great deal into the world; she is universally admired; yet she has never given her husband cause for uneasiness on her account a second time. The terrible lesson of two years ago has not been thrown away upon her; and even Beachborough now sings her praises. I know of no one who more adroitly tempers freedom of intercourse with discretion.

As for Claud, everything leads me to believe that he is contented too. He has, at all events, so much to make him so, that he must be very unreasonable if he is not. I don't suppose that he is supremely happy; but we must not look for a glut of supreme happiness, even in novels. It is surely enough if, at the end of our history. we can point to one household as the home of terrestrial bliss; and as such I really think that Croft Manor may, without exaggeration, be

described. Freddy and Geneviève are as much in love with one another as they were on their melancholy wedding-day; and, to all appearance, they are likely to remain so. Their dissimilarity of nature and tastes has proved anything but a misfortune to them. It has opened fresh horizons to them both; it has led them to make mutual willing concessions; and I am sure that neither of them would wish the other to be changed in the smallest particular. They understand one another, in short; they have confidence in one another; and in such a happy state of affairs is to be found, I should suppose, the basis of matrimonial harmony. Their manner of life is far quieter than that of their neighbours at Southlands; but it is by no means dull. Geneviève, as might have been expected, is rather fond of filling the house with dishevelled musical *dilettanti;* but Freddy, on his side, stipulates for the introduction of a less intellectual and artistic element into the company; and the two sets of guests have been made to amalgamate without difficulty, and, let us hope, with reciprocal benefit.

The cricket-week is still an annual institution. If the festivities which accompany it are conducted in a somewhat more decorous manner than of old, the change is probably due to the

influence of a lady who contrives to make herself obeyed after a quiet fashion; and indeed Lord Lynchester, who stands rather in awe of the present Lady Croft, has been heard to lament that she has not a little more "go" in her. Freddy, he says, isn't half the man he used to be.

"But what can you expect," he adds, "if fellows will go and get married? I can't think what the deuce they do it for. I wish I hadn't, I know!"

To which Colonel Finch responds, "Well, Lynchester, nobody can accuse you of behaving as if you had—eh?—what?"

Miss Potts is often to be seen taking a constitutional in the neighbourhood of Croft Manor. She was entreated to make that house her home, but, after some wavering, decided in favour of those rooms on the north side of Oxford Street which had formed the subject of her day-dreams for so long. When she wants a change, she comes down to Croft, knowing that she will always be welcome there. She is happy in the sight of her former pupil's happiness; and I may add that her modest vision has been realized in all its details.

When the Gervises are at Beachborough, there is, of course, a constant interchange of

visits between Croft Manor and Southlands. Freddy has a great affection, not unmixed with reverence, for Claud, whose advice he seeks upon all occasions of importance, and whom he classes in his own mind with Homer, Shakspeare, the author of "Soapy Spunge," and other geniuses of a lofty order. Claud, for his part, is, I think, as fond of his simple, kind-hearted little brother-in-law as he is of any one in the world. Their friendship grows stronger as they grow older, and neither of them is likely to allow anything to disturb it.

Whether a similar feeling of attachment unites their wives is another question. I have observed that the two ladies never meet without kissing one another; and I have likewise observed that, as soon as this salutation has been accomplished, the countenance of each of them is wont to be illumined by a happy, peaceful smile, such as nothing but the sense of a duty performed and a conscience at ease can call forth. Freddy often remarks what a good thing it is that Geneviève and Nina should be such friends; "because," says he, with one of his knowing looks, "it isn't always that sisters-in-law hit it off, don't you know."

The last news that reached me from Beachborough pointed to a change in the representa-

tion of the borough. It is understood that Mr. Pettigrew, who is now a very old man, does not intend to offer himself for re-election ; and I hear that certain overtures have been made, and favourably received, and that the chairman of the Conservative party has latterly been in constant communication with Southlands. There is thus fair ground for predicting that, before this book is in the hands of the reader, Claud will be in a position to tack the initials M.P. on to his name. Should this anticipation be realized, I shall expect to hear of his coming to the front in political life in the course of a few years ; for he is clever, unassuming, and fond of work ; he has a pleasant address, and a sufficient share of ambition ; and he is blessed with a wife whose social adaptability may, at some future date, prove of service to him.

THE END.

PRINTED BY WILLIAM CLOWES AND SONS, LIMITED, LONDON AND BECCLES.

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS-URBANA
3 0112 052948988